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A Sketch Comedy of Errors: *Chappelle's Show,* Stereotypes, and Viewers

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A Sketch Comedy of Errors: *Chappelle's Show*, Stereotypes, and Viewers

by

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Celebrities such as Halle Berry, Dave Chappelle, Kathy Griffin, and Don Imus have recently evoked public ire for making what some people have seen as tasteless jokes. Their notorious humorous communication shares two notable qualities: the discourse was mass mediated and the "jokes" were all premised on stereotypes. This two-part dissertation addresses the complicated subject of understanding the meanings viewers co-create with humorous mediated communication that is premised on racial stereotypes. I focus on *Chappelle's Show* as my primary text of analysis, but the findings here have applicability to the wider genre of humorous mediated communication that is premised on stereotypes.

In the first part of the dissertation I survey humor theory and humor criticism, noting weaknesses in the ways that communication scholars have previously studied humorous mediated texts. I then suggest that humor scholarship can be improved through two principal methods: 1. humor scholars of various academic disciplines need to use a

unified set of terms that refer to the humor stimulus, humor motivation, and the possible effects of the humor, and 2. critics of humorous mediated texts need to approach them as a unique genre, with a critical lens that accounts for the polysemy inherent in many humorous texts. In the next part of the dissertation, I model a multi-methodological approach to mining the mélange of meanings in *Chappelle's Show*.

My in-depth case study of racial stereotype-based humor in *Chappelle's Show* incorporates textual analysis of a dozen sketches, qualitative analysis of viewer opinions about the show, and a quantitative analysis of viewing behaviors as well as the relationship between viewing the show and prejudice. This multi-methodological approach helps better mine the polysemic meanings of the text because it explores the spectrum of the communication model from stimulus to receiver. I conclude that *Chappelle's Show* can both encourage and reduce prejudice. While inconclusive conclusions are an anomaly in media criticism, I advocate the pursuit of such conclusions in humor criticism. Stereotype-based mediated comedic texts demand an exploration of their multiple meanings, not a definitive statement about how they should be interpreted or how they affect an audience.

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

Humor can enhance our lives in many ways. The ability to see humor in life may help people cope with difficult situations (Vaillant 95). On a physiological level, humor can even increase one's tolerance of pain (Martin 314). Humorous television programs and films may also function as a form of escapism, allowing us to shrug off stress for a time. For example, when I was struggling with a particularly difficult exam question in graduate school, Will Ferrell's *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* was the panacea for my mental ills. Physically escaping from the office to the movie theater, and mentally escaping from my exam question into the inane antics of Ferrell's NASCAR parody allowed me to relax and ultimately return to my work in a more productive state of mind. This is but one personal example in which humor made my day better. But how far-reaching and long-lasting are the positive effects of humor? Can it be, as some have claimed, a corrective to serious social problems? In contrast, can it be a site where social problems are perpetuated or created?

My dissertation addresses the broad question of how scholars can better understand the empowering and disempowering features of mediated humorous communication. I focus on humor-based representations of racial stereotypes in television because I believe that the genre has not been given enough attention in rhetorical studies. To be sure, humorous television programs have been the subject of rhetorical criticism, but as I will discuss in Chapter Three, there is a lack of attention to the unique features of

humorous discourse and a lack of audience-based studies to more thoroughly support claims about the persuasiveness of humorous texts.

There are many varieties of comedy on television: situation comedies that depict a cast of characters going through life, stand-up comedies that have an entertainer telling a series of jokes onstage, and entire programs dedicated to amateur home videos of human and animal mishaps, just to name a few. This dissertation explores another sub-species of the comedy genre – television comedies that derive their humorous quality in large part by addressing racial stereotypes. While situation comedies and stand-up can also employ this type of humor, I am most interested in programs that focus mainly on stereotypes and that weave visual narratives that invite viewers to more intimately witness various dynamics of prejudice (not just telling jokes that involve discrimination and stereotypes). My dissertation focuses on *Chappelle's Show,* but the insight gained from my analysis will hopefully enhance scholarly understanding of how viewers or readers co-create transgressive and/or oppressive meanings with stereotype-driven television programs, films, and performances. As the endless tug-of-war of political correctness continues and boundaries of social acceptability continue to be negotiated through cultural texts, it is essential for communication scholars to consider how people make meanings with non-serious forms of communication.

CHAPPELLE'S SHOW AND COMEDY CONTROVERSIES

I have chosen to conduct a case study of *Chappelle's Show* because it has been a ground-breaking, wildly successful program: The second season of the program drew an average of 3.1 million viewers to cable network Comedy Central (Larson 6), the program

was nominated for three Emmy Awards ("Dave Chappelle Renews" 37), and the first season DVD sold over 3 million copies, breaking DVD sale records for television shows (Becker 32). Indeed, I have interviewed many *Chappelle's Show* viewers who stated that they began watching the show because their peers were talking about it and they, too, wanted to take part in conversations and jokes related to the show. *Chappelle's Show* was and still is a powerful cultural phenomenon. Similar television programs – such as *Mind of Mencia, Da Ali G Show, The Sarah Silverman Program*, and *South Park* – have proliferated in recent years, yet communication scholars have not thoroughly examined the meanings viewers co-create with these stereotype-driven comedies or the process of that meaning creation. While the possibility exists that humor can uproot racism by holding a mirror to society and exposing harmful ideologies, the opposite effect is also possible – humorous television programs may expose the discriminatory ideologies, but cultivate complacency about existing social conditions. An array of middle-ground responses can also result when viewers decode stereotype-based humor. It is important for communication scholars to question how, why, and under what conditions these various meanings are created.

When considering the multitude of humorous texts and reader responses to them, four recent controversies come to mind. The first, and most grave of the three examples, is the outcry and violence that resulted when Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* printed several cartoons lampooning Prophet Muhammad in September 2005, cartoons which were also reprinted in several European publications (Vara A13). Anger over the cartoons led to attacks on Danish embassies and many deaths from riots in Nigeria (Vara A13). Iran responded by fighting comic fire with comic fire, sponsoring a "Holocaust

International Cartoon Contest" that featured images containing mostly anti-Jewish, anti-American, and anti-British sentiment (Slackman A8). The Danish cartoons were intended as a statement of free speech. Perhaps the creators and producers anticipated that a similar cartoon response (such as the one by Iran) would be made, but they likely did not anticipate the world-wide violence. This incident brings up many issues related to communication, ethics, and humor. Most salient to this project, the Danish cartoon incident highlights the difficulties in understanding or predicting individuals' responses to texts in the comic genre.

While the Danish cartoon controversy and the ensuing violence are unusual, a more common humor backlash, at least in the United States, can be seen following a celebrity's ignorant comment, a politically incorrect television program, or a bigotry laden film that provokes the ire of particular cultural groups: case in point the protests following Don Imus' 2007 racist "joke" referring to the Rutgers women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hos." Imus walked the fine line between satirizing discrimination and perpetuating it for decades. This racial slur about a "hardworking team of young women who had done nothing to draw his ire but play college basketball while being black" became a focal point for the fury of many who had built up years of anger about Imus's stereotype-driven humor and about the White dominated media industry's habit of turning the other cheek on racist humor (Kosova 27, 29). In a rare outcome, the CBS network fired Imus from his radio program; however, he returned to the air six months later with a nationally syndicated program in the ABC network.

A third example in which entertainment crossed the intangible line from satirical to offensive is the 2006 film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit*

Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan, which is a mockumentary of fictitious Kazakh reporter Borat's attempts to understand American culture. The film producers created various scenarios that depicted "real" people (people who did not know the fictitious premise of the film or that Borat was an actor) responding to Borat's racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, and heterosexist words and actions. In a film review for *Newsweek,* David Ansen interprets the film as a social critique: "it soon becomes clear that the ultimate joke is not on Borat, but on us. With its cavalcade of drunken frat boys, well-mannered racists and a gun dealer who doesn't bat an eye when Borat asks him what would be the best gun for shooting a Jew . . . , *Borat* paints a portrait of the American subconscious that would give you nightmares . . ." (para. 3). *Borat's* creator and star Sacha Baron Cohen is a devout Jew who likely had good intentions with the film, but the anti-Semitic scenarios led the Jewish Anti-Defamation League to issue a statement of concern that the film would reinforce bigotry (quoted in Weinman para. 13).

And finally, the 2003-2006 sketch comedy program *Chappelle's Show* has been embroiled in controversy. *Chappelle's Show,* featuring comedian Dave Chappelle, brought laughter to millions by poking fun at racial stereotypes, sexuality, and popular culture. In 2004, *TV Guide* proclaimed Chappelle the "funniest man on TV" and an accompanying article described his show as taking a "riotously blunt look at race in America" (Fretts 26). Chappelle abruptly left the production of the third season amid a swirl of rumors that he had had a mental breakdown or was heavily using drugs. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Chappelle explained that his hasty departure resulted from concerns about the effects *Chappelle's Show* may have on viewers. During the filming of a sketch about Black stereotypes, a White spectator laughed "particularly loud and long"

causing Chappelle to wonder if "the new season of his show had gone from sending up stereotypes to merely reinforcing them" (quoted in Farley and Robinson 72). Chappelle's ethical dilemma gestures toward important questions about the relationship between stereotype-based humor and viewers' attitudes about race: What is the breadth of the polysemy of a stereotype-based humorous text? What textual features inform viewers' decodings of various meanings from stereotype-based humorous texts? How does one's identity and life experiences relate to how they interpret the meaning of a humorous text? What are the viewer characteristics that constitute a unique interpretive community? These are important issues that have not yet been adequately addressed in communication scholarship. Before pursuing these questions more in-depth, however, we will back up and look at the political economy behind *Chappelle's Show's* mediated messages.

CHAPPELLE'S SHOW: POLITICAL ECONOMY

Dave Chappelle is *Chappelle's Show's* star and executive producer, which makes the program somewhat unique in a television landscape that is dominated by White writers, actors, and producers. Because of this continued racial hierarchy in television production, Dates and Stroman contend that the prime time stories of African Americans do not reflect their unique experiences, "but rather the perceptions of White producers, sponsors, writers, and owners" (208). It is progressive, then, that Chappelle claims to have had a strong measure of control over the content of *Chappelle's Show.* Compared to his experiences with other networks, Chappelle praised the range of expression Comedy Central afforded him: "There's no comparison with the freedom I would not have on the major networks" (Wallenstein N6). In an interview from 2004, Chappelle reveled in his

creative freedom remarking, “I like the idea of people watching and asking, ‘Can he say that?’” (Ogunnaike E5).

Comedy Central is home to many other controversial and socially perceptive programs including *South Park* and *The Daily Show.* Knowledge of the Comedy Central line-up and of the network’s ownership helps situate the discussion of *Chappelle’s Show’s* creative control: Comedy Central is a subsidiary of Viacom, placing it in the same family with tawdry MTV and BET, both of which appeal heavily to the 18-24 demographic (Viacom Website November 6, 2007).

Although the FOX network pushes the boundaries of social acceptability by using the most profane language of all major networks (Kaye and Sapolsky 562), it did not allow Chappelle nearly as much creative freedom as Comedy Central. It was not language that troubled networks executives, but the race of the characters: During the development of a show with FOX in 2001, Chappelle was asked to “broaden the appeal” by adding White characters (Fretts 25). He walked away from the deal and criticized the network:

> What they were saying is if you’re a White person watching television, and you don’t see a White person on the screen, you will arbitrarily change the station because nothing in your life will be reflected on the show. (Wallenstein para. 4)

In contrast to what would have happened with FOX, Chappelle praised his opportunities for creative expression at Comedy Central. In an interview with *TV Guide,* he noted, “I don’t have to do the ‘least objectionable programming,’ which is a network phrase I’ve heard throughout the years. Comedy Central’s like, ‘Go ahead, be objectionable’” (Fretts 26). Because Comedy Central is on cable, not network television, it does not have to contend with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) decency standards, and

thereby has the power to give Chappelle more creative freedom with the content he creates.

Although the FCC is not a powerful force regulating Comedy Central's programming, Chappelle did allude to some conflict or turmoil he had with the Hollywood powers that be during his interview with James Lipton on *Inside the Actors Studio*. In his responses to several questions, Chappelle lamented that there are only six major television studios, and noted that he walked out from *Chappelle's Show* twice in the second season (in addition to his exodus to Africa in the third season). It is unclear from Chappelle's comments whether his inner conflict about the show came primarily from the top-down – the network pushing him to create sketches or agree to terms he was not comfortable with, as the *Inside the Actors Studio* interview seems to suggest – or from the bottom-up – he was worried about the audience's response to the show, as other parts of the *Inside the Actors Studio* interview and the *Newsweek* interview seems to suggest. My best guess would be that both were factors in his decision to leave the program. In sum, although Comedy Central seems like a ready-made venue for boundary pushing, especially when compared to network television, Chappelle still seemed uncomfortable with his relationship to the network. He also seemed uncomfortable with his relationship with the viewers. Perhaps drawing a large audience and achieving industry success come with an unfortunate tension: increased demands from the broadcast company (whether cable or standard network) that helped one gain that fame, and increased demands from oneself to maintain the veracity of a creative vision.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Even with his professed creative freedom, Chappelle was deeply troubled by the ways in which viewers, particularly Whites, may interpret his racial stereotype-driven comedy. With such divergent possible meanings – social critique or model for discrimination – constructed from the stereotype-driven humor of the popular culture examples discussed earlier the questions remain, what meanings do viewers co-create with stereotype-driven humorous texts and how do scholars mine those meanings to better understand the transgressive or oppressive impact of such texts? In order to answer those questions, I have created a two-part dissertation. I first explore rhetorical theories on humor and actual essays of humor criticism, asking the following questions:

- What theories and methods exist for understanding the rhetorical dimensions of humor?
- What are the strengths and limitations in the theoretical underpinnings and methodologies of contemporary essays in rhetorical criticism with regard to understanding how viewers co-create meanings with stereotype-based humor?

In order to answer the first question, I have surveyed three sets of humor theories: literary theories that address characteristics of satire, parody, and irony, humor motivational theories that look at the causes of amusement, and rhetorical theories on the role of humor and other symbolism in promoting (or discouraging) social change. In order to have a coherent method of humor criticism, it is important to agree upon definitions of each theory or concept and also to put these theories in dialogue with one another, so that areas of commonality and areas of difference are illuminated.

After surveying the literature on various humor theories in Chapter Two, I then examine how those theories inform communication journal articles that examine humorous mediated texts. In Chapter Three, I analyze almost 40 journal articles, focusing on the theories and methods they employ, and their conclusions about the impact of their humorous mediated text(s) on society. Three themes emerged from my survey that all gesture toward a disciplinary weakness in studying humorous texts as their own unique genre, separate from the broader category of popular culture texts. Humor theories and terms are often used without being thoroughly defined. More troubling is the overall lack of audience research to support claims about the formation of interpretive communities and actual effects on viewers.

Following the discussion of humor theory and the assessment of humor criticism, I then suggest how to improve upon the limitations of contemporary humor studies by modeling a tripartite methodological approach to understanding stereotype-driven humorous television that incorporates textual analysis, focus groups with viewers, and survey measures of media effectivity. In that case study, I seek to answer the following questions:

- What does textual analysis reveal about the images *Chappelle's Show* constructs of races/ethnicities and race relations?
- What polysemic meanings about races/ethnicities and race relations may be drawn from the text?
- What do qualitative and quantitative audience-based studies reveal about the conscious and unconscious meanings that viewers co-create with the portrayals of race/ethnicity and racial/ethnic relations?

- In what ways do the findings of the audience-based studies complement or supplement the textual analysis?

By comparing the rhetorical/textual analysis to focus group findings, I am able to account for some of my "blind spots" as a critic by expanding the knowledge of how many other viewers of various races, ethnicities, genders, ages, and life experiences interpret the program. Furthermore, the complementary conscious and unconscious measures of *Chappelle's Show's* interactions with viewer prejudice shed light on attitudes that viewers are unwilling to admit or of which they are unaware. Ultimately I argue that the multi-methodological approach adds greater understanding of the persuasiveness of stereotype-driven humorous texts by unraveling the discursive incongruities at the heart of much humor and learning how viewers engage in sense-making by electing to focus on certain discourses in the humor that are most relevant to their orientations. Before laying out more specifics about the process by which I answer the research questions, it is important to clarify my theoretical orientation toward humor and to unpack various terms that inform my view of critical media studies.

METHOD INFORMED BY THEORY

Humor and its Related Terms

Webster's New World Dictionary defines humor as "the quality that makes something seem funny, amusing, or ludicrous; comicality" (684). This basic definition serves as the root of my conceptualization of humor. Note that comicality, derived from the word comedy, is used synonymously with humor. In this project, I will not distinguish between comedy and humor, for I consider them one and the same, and they

are generally used in everyday language as such. However, the word "humor" will most often be my word of choice so as to more clearly differentiate my conceptualization of humor/comedy from Kenneth Burke's theories of humor and the comic frame, the latter of which is widely used by rhetorical scholars approaching humorous texts (see, for example, Carlson "Limitations"; Cooper and Pease; Murphy).

Within the realm of humor, there is a variety of terms with which to grapple. Martin explains that "The term *humor* can be used to refer to a stimulus (e.g., a comedy film), a mental process (e.g., perception or creation of amusing incongruities), or a response (e.g., laughter, exhilaration)" (505). I have identified three sets of vocabulary that are commonly used in academic studies of humorous texts and experiences: literary theories (notably satire, parody, and irony), humor motivational theories (incongruity, relief, and superiority), and rhetorical theories (humor that dwarfs the situation, perspective by incongruity, the comic frame, the burlesque frame, Signifying, and the carnivalesque). These sets of terms roughly correspond to the three realms of humor described by Martin: literary theories refer to the stimulus, the humor motivation theories address the mental processes involved in amusement, and the rhetorical theories address how discursive tropes invite particular responses, from both the individual and society. Although I am a rhetorical scholar, I have elected not to use Burke's theories as my only lens. I find Burke's theories on comedy and humor intriguing and insightful, but have the same criticisms of them that I have for the other humor motivation and literary theories. All three under-theorize a key area of humor studies: the audience. Instead of selecting one theory set in order to understand the racial stereotype-driven humor, I can make a greater theoretical contribution by putting these three sets of theories in dialogue with one

another, by explaining how they are interrelated and complement one another. Chapter Two is dedicated to the pursuit of this grand dialogue.

In the next section, I will unpack key terms that inform my methodological approach to critically understanding stereotype-driven humorous television programs. Of central importance is my critical standpoint on the polysemy of humorous media, which is mutually informed by my conceptions of audience and text.

Polysemy: Theoretical Conceptions of Audience and Text

Out of the various television genres, it is perhaps most difficult to determine a dominant meaning from comedy: Humor is often premised on taboo violations (for therein lies an incongruity), but is by nature distanced from seriousness, thereby making it difficult to label any comedic discourse strictly transgressive or oppressive. Throughout history, that polysemic nature has enabled comedy to be seen as a relatively safe form of expression by oppressed peoples (see, for example, Bakhtin 133-142; Stallybrass and White 12). However, humor's distance from seriousness may make it a weak tool for combating oppression in our society in which ideological forces are extremely powerful and adaptable in their maintenance of hegemony. Because of humor's slippery nature many factors must be considered when examining the meaning viewers may make with humorous texts.

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,* Freud claims that the meaning of tendentious (or aggressive) humor is located in three parties: "in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled" (Freud 100). Racial stereotype-based jokes or any jokes made at the expense of a person

or group of people are considered aggressive, and as such, are the most relevant to discuss in this project. Part of the difficulty in evaluating the effects of aggressive humor comes from diverse courses of meaning-making that occur within these three parties – the source, the object of the joke, and the audience for which it is intended. In humorous texts, it is also likely that people who are the object of the joke may be part of the audience. The perceptions of people hearing the tendentious joke may not be consistent among each other. One's interpretation of humor may differ according to the text and context of the humor, the source of the humor, and how the receiver crafts their identity from among multiple subject positions.

Cultural studies theories on subject positions are integral to the analysis of racial stereotype driven humor, for one's identity necessarily impacts their perceptions of a text. Hall offers this explanation of the "ideological subject" as he appropriates Gramsci's work for the study of race and ethnicity:

> He [Gramsci] recognizes the 'plurality' of selves or identities of which the so-called "subject" of thought and ideas is composed. He argues that this multi-faceted nature of consciousness is not an individual but a collective phenomenon, a consequence of the relationship between "the self" and the ideological discourses which compose the cultural terrain of society. ("Gramsci" 433)

The subject, in this configuration, does not pre-exist, but is instead shaped by the dialectic between self and socially circulating ideological discourses. Overarching identity categories such as race, class, gender, do not interpellate homogeneous subjects; instead, the subject is configured by a web of meanings, a web of discourses that will interact in various ways with mediated discourses (Morley and Brunsdon 282-283).

The recent GEICO commercials, which advertise that getting an insurance rate quote is "so easy, even a caveman could do it" represent a simplified parody of this

complex process. In one version, the slogan is accompanied by the narrative of a caveman being gravely offended at the commercial's connotation that he is unintelligent, much to the dismay of his "evolved" female therapist who claims it is "just an advertisement." In this dialogue, we see the comparison between the caveman's response to being situated as the butt of the joke and the therapist's response to being identified more with the joke teller than the target, thus illustrating how these contrasting identifications and subject positions can lead to disparate interpretations of tendentious humor. If, for example, the therapist was sensitive toward "humorous" discriminatory discourses that targeted female professionals, she may have been more empathic toward the caveman's interpretation. However, due in part to her subject position, she was not motivated to challenge the GEICO discourse.

In order to understand how there may be varying interpretations of stereotype-based humor, it is important to consider how various scholars use the word "polysemy," which can be loosely defined as the existence of multiple meanings in a single text. Many rhetorical and critical cultural scholars have used the word polysemy/polysemic to describe various texts. In a 1998 article in *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* Leah Ceccarelli argued that these scholars are applying the term polysemy in very different ways. She catalogues three main uses that locate the multiplicity of meaning in different agents: 1. "resistive reading" in which the viewers construct meanings from the text that are outside the dominant ideology, 2. "strategic ambiguity," which posits that the rhetor has purposely created an open text so that it will appeal to a wide audience, and 3. "hermeneutic depth" that positions the critic as the creator of a new argument about how the way audience members *should* read a text (Ceccarelli 399-409).

Ceccarelli acknowledges that all three forms of polysemy may represent powerful counter-hegemonic tools, but cautions that polysemy should not be universally praised. *The Cosby Show* is an example cited in her essay and in many other critical books and essays. Ceccarelli argues that the TV program is an example of "strategic ambiguity" for it appealed to people of various races, thus presenting a large and profitable audience to producers (404). However, in order to appeal to a broader audience, the program did not tackle challenging issues about race and racism, thereby allowing White viewers to remain in their comfort zones and discouraging positive social change (see Jhally and Lewis 4). Herman Gray argues similarly that the FOX sketch comedy *In Living Color* was also able to resonate in various ways with different culturally-situated viewers, thus attracting a larger overall audience (131). He further explains that the "crossover appeal" is the source of "considerable angst and criticism" for the program can be interpreted in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ways (131).

While I do not intend to make an argument about which of the three conceptions of polysemy is the most consistent with what happens in reality (indeed, many critics such as Condit and Dow believe that the open nature of texts has been overstated [see Condit 103; Dow 4]), I believe that viewers can derive a multiplicity of meanings from *Chappelle's Show* and I also believe that this polysemy benefits Comedy Central financially by drawing a larger audience compared to a closed or non-polysemic text. Admittedly, part of this judgment about the relative openness of the text is based in my discussions with other people whose interpretations of the program differ from mine, but part is also based in the theories of John Fiske. In Fiske's 1986 article entitled "Television: Polysemy and Popularity," he states that "jokes, like metaphors, like irony,

rely on the collision between discourses, and neither the text, nor the dominant ideology, can ever control all the potential meanings that this collision produces" (402). The spaces left by the collision of discursive threads allow individual viewers to fill the gaps using their own subjectivity, thereby leading to numerous interpretations of a humorous text and to the possibility of a multiplicity of readings.

Another feature that can rupture the power of dominant ideologies is television's property of segmentation. Fiske explains that television programs contain "short, self-contained segments linked by association rather than by logic," which allows for more openness than a film that presents a more coherent narrative argument ("Polysemy" 402). *Chappelle's Show* can perhaps be considered even more open because each episode is formatted as a series of independent sketches. These smaller segments can be more appealing to a diversity of viewers who are socially situated in various ways. If one does not identify with the meanings in one particular sketch, one need only wait a few more minutes and another sketch will be presented that holds the potential for a different set of meanings. By selecting to focus on a few sketches they found favorable, as opposed to the coherent trajectory of the show, viewers of *Chappelle's Show* may distill various different meanings from the program.

Prominent cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall offers a slightly different conception of viewer-centered polysemy, explaining that there are three positions from which one may decode discourse. The first, labeled "dominant-hegemonic," refers to the decoding of discourse in a manner that is consistent with its institutional encoding ("Encoding" 101). The second, referred to as the "negotiated code," describes the position of one who acknowledges and accepts hegemonic ideologies but applies those

ideologies inconsistently to their own situations (Hall "Encoding" 102). A person who engages in the negotiated code may then use oppositional ideologies when it suits them. The final decoding position exemplifies the possibilities of struggle in discourse: The "oppositional code" refers to purposeful decoding in a manner that is contrary to the dominant definition (Hall "Encoding" 103).

Fiske does not disagree entirely with Hall's conception of the three viewer positions, but argues that it is an over-simplified account of viewer interactions for there are rarely "perfectly dominant or purely oppositional readings of a text" (*Culture* 64). He advises that it is more productive to think of television viewing as "a process of negotiation between the text and its variously socially situated readers" (*Culture* 64). In order to highlight his assertion that television viewers are not one homogeneous mass "audience," Fiske advocates the use of the term "viewer" or "reader" to denote that individuals actively make meaning with the text (*Culture* 15). Viewer is also the term I will use most often to signal my theoretical orientation toward the process through which mediated meanings are made in a text-viewer interaction.

Whereas Hall presumes three positions from which one may decode a television message and Fiske posits a more nuanced process of viewer/text negotiation, Gray and Cloud use the term "ambivalence" to describe a binary system of interpretation Cloud 314; Gray 130-132). Gray explains that the ambiguous nature of racial representation in the sketch comedy *In Living Color* can have disparate effects on prejudice: "For some, this ambivalence contests hegemonic assumptions and representations of race in general and blacks in particular in the American social order; for others, it simply perpetuates troubling images of blacks" (131). Cloud is skeptical about the counter-hegemonic

potential of ambivalent racial representation, but does acknowledge that many critics found Hawk, the African American foil in the detective drama *Spenser: For Hire,* to be a "powerful role model image for black urban youth" (312).

The main strength of Gray's theory of ambivalence, and the reason that my textual analysis utilizes that theory, is that ambivalence does not operate with the assumption of one dominant, institutionally encoded reading. Whereas Hall describes three positions of encoding that deviate from or adhere to the dominant reading, Gray does not assume that there is *one* way in which the text is intended to be read. Ambivalence does not require one to judge if *Chappelle's Show* is polysemic due to viewers' resistive readings or due to ambiguity that developed organically through the show's production and institutional encoding. Ambivalence only posits that a program may be decoded in a way that reinforces prejudice or in a way that uproots prejudice.

Textual Analysis versus Audience Analysis

A scholar's theoretical stance on polysemy, the nature of textual meaning, and the agency of viewers necessarily informs their method of criticism. At the heart of my tripartite methodological approach to understanding *Chappelle's Show* is the controversy over polysemy, and by association, controversy over the scholarly value of textual analysis versus audience analysis. As noted previously, many scholars theorize that texts advance a dominant meaning that the audience is encouraged to decode. Similarly, many scholars argue that texts create audiences and that to understand the audience, one must understand the text. Scholars who take these theoretical standpoints would likely undertake text-based analysis to understand the persuasive properties of a text.

Traditionally, the latter theoretical and critical path is the one that rhetorical scholars adopt. Rhetorical media scholar Bonnie Dow argues that textual analysis is its own persuasive argument, explaining the purpose of textual analysis as follows:

> This perspective does not see criticism as an attempt to provide the most accurate retelling of how a text is received or as an attempt to account for the widest variety of interpretations; rather, it views criticism as an argumentative activity in which the goal is to persuade the audience that their knowledge of a text will be enriched if they choose to see a text as the critic does, while never assuming that that particular "way of seeing" is the only or the best way to see that text (or that all audiences do, in fact, see it that way). (4)

On the other side of the debate, noted critical cultural studies scholars Hall, Fiske, and Sonia Livingstone, among others, argue that text/viewer interactions are dynamic. In order to understand the complex process of meaning-making, scholars must study viewers or readers of texts (see, for example, Fiske *Culture* 72; Livingstone 288). The theoretical standpoint of my project also follows this line of thinking. I believe that individual viewers bring their particular subject positions to the text and make various meanings through unique interactions with the text; therefore, we must look at not only the text, but also individual viewers in order to understand how they may be persuaded. Audience-centered methods may involve viewer ethnographies (watching the program with actual viewers and noting their behaviors and interactions), interviewing viewers individually or in a focus group, or collecting statistical survey data (see, for example, Justin Lewis).

Dow excuses herself (and rhetorical scholars) from the text versus viewer debate by arguing that each method is engaged in a different *purpose.* To summarize her previous quote, Dow argues that the rhetorical critic is making an argument that their way of seeing the text is of worth, not that the audience sees the text that way. Furthermore,

she states that textual analysis and audience-centered criticism are equally valuable; they just use different types of evidence to support different claims. In my research of rhetorical criticism of humorous texts, however, many claims of rhetorical scholars take on a decidedly audience-centered focus arguing about how the text actually persuades. Unfortunately, these claims are not supported with studies involving viewers, thus making the method of textual analysis *less valuable* than audience-centered analysis in supporting the authors' claims of persuasive effects.

Olson and Olson take the same text-centric position as Dow, but criticize the weaknesses of audience-based studies to support their stance: They state that "if a rhetorical critic's specialty is the intricacies of a text's meaning-making operations and options, even a reader-centered approach cannot be limited to the known reactions of actual readers" (25). In my experience, however, audience-based studies can offer a hearty complement to a critic's intricate textual analysis. The meanings viewers construct can be surprising, especially concerning humorous texts. And although a rhetorical critic is perhaps more skilled at hunting for textual clues that may guide reader's responses, the critic may never know about the host of life experiences individual viewers or readers bring to the text when they engage in sense-making. Furthermore, I think that combining textual analysis and audience studies can never hurt rhetorical critics, but help will help them craft more complete and meaningful arguments.

Methods of Humor Criticism

I believe there are "blind spots" to any method of textual or audience-based criticism. Viewers *and* critics may be unaware of the ways in which the viewers may be making meanings with media. As such, it is important to look at *both* text and viewers

when conducting a critical analysis. Furthermore, it can be productive to use a variety of audience-based methods to account for bias in viewer self-reports. In what follows, I will describe some of the shortcomings or "blind spots" of various critical approaches to humorous texts, ultimately arguing that several methods are needed to form the most complete understanding of persuasion.

If a scholar chooses to use only textual analysis, he or she may make incorrect claims about a text's effects because the persuasive properties they uncovered in the text may be inconsistent with the meaning that many viewers have created. Although effects are not the focus of rhetorical criticism, Stromer-Galley and Schiappa found that many rhetorical critics of make inferential leaps about popular culture texts' effects on viewers/readers or society. After conducting a survey of journals printed by the Speech Communication Association (now National Communication Association) from the early 1990s, the authors concluded that rhetorical critics of popular culture texts were overstating their audience claims. In one of the most fascinating sections of their article, Stromer-Galley and Schiappa compare text-based audience speculations advanced in a book chapter by G. Thomas Goodnight to their own focus group results, revealing considerable disparities between the text-based audience speculation and the audience-based attitude findings. Goodnight is likely in good company, for I also believe that the majority of rhetorical studies of humor would also demonstrate this disjunct if audience studies were conducted and compared to many critics' text-based findings.

While a rhetorical scholar may not have the support to advance claims about how a text influences viewers, the worth of textual analysis should not be underestimated. These scholarly findings can certainly be used to construct an argument that viewers'

"knowledge of a text will be enriched if they choose to see a text as the critic does" (Dow 4; see also Brockriede; McGee). As Stromer-Galley and Schiappa concede, "certainly there is room for rhetorical criticism that is creative, provocative, and highly speculative" (55). It is important, nonetheless, that a critic in this situation takes care with the wordings he or she uses, and does not overstate their claims by making arguments about how the viewers are actually affected by a text.

Qualitative reception studies, a term I use to denote audience analysis through focus groups, interviews, ethnographies, participant observation, or even gathering opinions from on-line message boards, are another vital method for media critics. Although any rhetorical critic is a socially situated viewer, one strength of this method is that it provides a greater breadth of knowledge from viewers of many subject positions. For example, as a white female in her late-20s, I may have drastically different interpretations of *Chappelle's Show* compared to an Asian male in his late teens. I believe that the analysis of qualitative data – transcripts from interviews, on-line postings, notes from ethnographies or participant observation – is also an exercise in rhetorical criticism for it seeks to understand and interpret the meaning of discourse.

The final method I will discuss, statistical analysis, refers to gathering and analyzing survey data about viewing behaviors, tastes and preferences, demographics, and attitudes. In this method, one may also manipulate research participants' exposure to mediated texts to discern if there is an attitude change after viewing. Statistical studies are useful for this dissertation and many other scholarly projects because they can potentially mine attitudes and meanings that are unlikely to be found in self-reported information. In other words, this methodology taps into meanings and attitudes of which

the viewers may be unaware or unwilling to admit. For example, Stromer-Galley and Schiappa are careful not to claim that Goodnight's assertions are incorrect: Instead, they offer that the texts may have "affected audiences in ways in which they [audience members] are unaware" (49).

In the context of this project, racism is not a socially desirable attitude, but the Modern Racism Scale can be useful in exposing a correlation between *Chappelle's Show* viewing and racist attitudes (McConahay 92-93). In order to more deeply mine the undesirable attitude of prejudice, I will also conduct a study that measures unconscious preference for Whites or African Americans. The Implicit Association Test (IAT), developed by Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji, removes the self-presentation bias of survey data by indirectly measuring preference for one race over the other. The IAT accomplishes this by timing the participant's association between the image of an African American or Caucasian person and a positive or negative adjective. The test and the analysis of the participant's responses are all undertaken through the Project Implicit Webpage: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/. Although rhetorical critics are unlikely to be trained in the methods of quantitative data collection and analysis, I think it is useful to invest the time and energy into at least having a basic understanding of survey construction and the meanings of common statistical measures. Even if rhetorical critics do not opt to conduct their own quantitative studies, their own research would perhaps benefit from being able to consult and understand findings in quantitative essays.

In my dissertation, I argue that humorous television programs that address stereotypes are notably polysemic. Consequently, the most fitting approach to understanding stereotype-driven mediated humor is to incorporate textual, qualitative,

and quantitative analyses in order to enhance the scope of one's scholarly and social contribution. Dow states that the main difference between audience and textual critics is that they just use different evidence (15). In my opinion, scholars who study texts that are as polysemic as *Chappelle's Show* and many other comedies need to use a diversity of evidence to provide a more complete picture of the program's persuasive effects. In the final section of this introduction, I outline how I build my argument and report the findings of my analysis of the meanings that viewers co-create with *Chappelle's Show*.

CHAPTER PREVIEW

Part I

Part I orients readers to the literature on humor theory and humor criticism. Chapter Two surveys literary, motivational, and rhetorical theories of humor. I cover many theorists spanning classical and contemporary rhetoric, psychology, psychoanalysis, literature, and linguistics. These include Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Quintilian, Thomas Hobbes, George Campbell, Thomas Hobbs, Mikhail Bakhtin, Sigmund Freud, Soren Kierkegaard, Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth, Clare Colebrook, Salvatore Attardo, and Roger Kreuz. I provide working definitions for each concept and demonstrate the interlinked nature of the theories as they related to the humor stimulus (literary theory), process of amusement (humor motivation), and potential effects on society (rhetorical theories).

Chapter Three surveys and evaluates contemporary essays involving the rhetorical criticism of humorous texts that are published in communication journals. The main point I make with this chapter is that criticism of humorous texts does not treat humorous

discourse as its own nuanced sub-genre of popular culture. Some of the weaknesses in humor scholarship are that scholars do not adequately define their humor theories, and they also theorize about various audiences and speculate about persuasive effects without utilizing audience studies to support their claims. Collectively, these weaknesses have a stultifying effect on scholarship for new evidence and support is not being brought to the critical table.

Part II

Part II of my dissertation presents solutions to the criticisms of humor scholarship that I advanced in Part I by describing the findings of my multi-methodological case study of *Chappelle's Show*. Chapter Four begins the case study with a rhetorical analysis of the three seasons of the program, paying particular attention to the ways in which the program addresses issues of race/ethnicity and racism. I have transcribed dialogue and taken copious notes on the appearances of the actors and any audible audience reactions to all of the sketches, but have only selected a dozen to discuss in the analysis. These twelve sketches were chosen because they are representative of the program, and productively illustrate the issues of ambiguity in the program's use of racial stereotype-based humor.

Several prominent themes of ambivalence emerged from the analysis. For example, the non-subtle use of stereotypes may function to reify those stereotypes in the minds of some viewers or it may shatter those negative stereotypes. Similarly, the persistent use of the N word may strip the word of its offensive power or it may just desensitize viewers to the harm of using it in their personal interactions. In terms of the legal sphere, *Chappelle's Show* may illuminate and uproot racist practices, or it may reify

stereotypes about African Americans and crime. *Chappelle's Show* may also give voice to African Americans who experience various forms of discrimination in their daily lives, thereby functioning as a gentle Burkean social corrective. On the contrary, these depictions of racism may trivialize the perceived impact that discrimination has on African Americans.

It is clear from these diametrically opposed potential interpretations that a rhetorical critic must understand more about the viewers themselves and their processes of interpretation in order to make a more substantial argument about the impact of a program. Chapter Five reports the findings of the first of two audience studies. I conducted almost 20 focus groups with college-age *Chappelle's Show* viewers from spring 2005 to fall 2007. All groups were segregated by their self-identified race or ethnicity per the suggestion of Jensen and Jhally and Lewis that homogeneous groups are most useful for understanding distinct interactions with media. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed and open-coded into ten categories. Related categories were then grouped into three broader categories: appeal, stereotypes, and effects.

I distilled several competing tensions from the analysis, all of which can be attributed to "relevance" – the "meanings and pleasures from television that are relevant to [viewers'] social allegiances at the moment of viewing" (Fiske "Meaningful Moments" 247). First, whereas many groups described negative African American stereotypes portrayed in the show, the majority hypothesized that there would be only positive effects of the program. Racism and issues of racial differences seemed to be a salient feature to many of the African American viewers interviewed and perhaps guilt over racial

privilege or concerns about appearing to be racist were relevant to non-African Americans, and Caucasians in particular. A second overarching and very serious tension can be seen within the theme of boundary crossing or taboo violation. Numerous participants stated that *Chappelle's Show* was humorous and/or a positive social force because it encourages viewers to relax about serious issues through its violation of social norms. While addressing controversial issues and taboo subjects may be positive, several participants seemed to suggest that society should be more "relaxed" about serious issues such as racial discrimination and sexual assault. Finally, racism, racial stereotypes, and the portrayal of unique African American experiences seemed highly relevant to the African American focus groups and few others. That is not to say that all African American participants expressed the same sentiments or that these issues were not on non-African Americans' radars. On the whole, however, the African American participants seemed more aware of the potential negative consequences of the program, but also of the positive ways in that the content of the show that more closely relates to their unique life experiences.

Chapter Six, the final chapter of analysis, reports the results of two statistical studies: one measuring viewers' conscious prejudices and their opinions regarding *Chappelle's Show,* and the other measuring participants' unconscious levels of prejudice following their viewing a *Chappelle's Show* sketch or a clip from *The Cosby Show* (as a counter-stereotypical comparison). In spring 2006, I gathered survey data from 160 undergraduate students, and in fall 2007 – spring 2008, I gathered implicit attitude measures from 158 additional participants. The first set of data was analyzed for significant relationships between prejudice and viewing or liking *Chappelle's Show,* and

the relationship between the participants' race/ethnicity and viewing or liking *Chappelle's Show.* As predicted, according to Fiske's theory about the polysemy of popular and humorous texts, the relationships were not significant. In other words, participants' races/ethnicities or prejudice levels were not related to their frequency of viewing *Chappelle's Show* or how much they like the program.

The participants were also required to watch one of two sketches from the program (either before or after completing the survey measures of prejudice) to see if attitudes toward race were significantly different after viewing the sketches compared to those who did not view anything. The results were not significant, but I will describe some interesting trends in the data. Similarly the second set of data was analyzed to see if there was a significant difference between the unconscious prejudice of people who viewed one of four *Chappelle's Show* sketches or viewed a clip from *The Cosby Show*. The differences among the groups also were not statistically significant.

The concluding chapter of the dissertation compares the results of the various methodological approaches to *Chappelle's Show,* and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of each method. Ultimately, I find that racial stereotype-based humor is an extremely complex communicative phenomenon that demands a multi-method approach to more fully mine the nuances of its persuasion. The textual analysis of a rhetorical critic can help explicate the ways in which viewers may interpret the program, thereby yielding hypotheses about the program's effectivity. However, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to mine all of the potential meanings inherent in stereotype-driven humor on one's own. Gathering and analyzing qualitative data about viewers' opinions sheds light on the processes by which viewers make meanings with the humor and also illuminates

the frames of relevance that moderate viewers' interpretations of the text. Finally, the quantitative methods can most effectively mine viewers' conscious and unconscious attitudes, which may be influenced by their interactions with the text.

If scholars continue to explore how viewers interact with humorous texts, it is possible that we may make practical suggestions as to how humorous mediated texts can be used as a positive social force. I hope that this dissertation marks a positive step in improving our understanding of the persuasive properties of racial stereotype-driven humor and represents a starting point upon which other humor studies build.

PART I: *HUMOR THEORY AND CRITICISM*

Chapter 2: *The Roots of Humor Theory*

> The theory of comedy in general is perhaps the most elusive and tenuous among all theories in polite learning, and certainly the theory of what makes people laugh is the most baffling element in comedy. (Herrick 1)

The study of humor has been, and remains, a challenging enterprise for scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Humor is a polysemic art and its study is further complicated by the lack of agreement on vocabulary sets to describe, explain, and critique humorous texts and experiences. Martin explains that "The term *humor* can be used to refer to a stimulus (e.g., a comedy film), a mental process (e.g., perception or creation of amusing incongruities), or a response (e.g., laughter, exhilaration)" (505, emphasis in original). These three functions of the word humor have three corresponding sets of vocabulary that I have identified: literary theories (notably satire, parody, and irony) classify the stimulus, humor motivational theories (incongruity, relief, and superiority) focus on the processes of amusement, and rhetorical theories (Burkean humor, irony, the comic and burlesque frames, along with Signifying and the carnivalesque) describe the discursive forms that invite particular responses from individuals and collectives.

In this chapter, I aim to promote a more unified understanding of humor theories by providing a comprehensive summary of humor's stimuli, processes, and outcomes, and by explicating the relationships between them all. I've created the following chart to

preview the layout of the chapter and to aid in the clarification of the relationships among the theories:

Table 2.1

Three Dimensions of Humor Based on Martin's Classifications

Processes	*Humor Motivation Theory*	incongruity	relief	superiority
Stimulus	*Literary Theory*	irony	parody and satire	
Invited Response	*Rhetorical Theory*	perspective by incongruity, comic frame	Signifying, dwarfing the situation	carnivalesque, burlesque frame

This chapter is organized thematically around the three theories of humor motivation (incongruity, relief, and superiority), for these are the connective tissue uniting particular types of texts and sets of responses to those texts. The theories of humor motivation are also the oldest realm of humor theory, and, perhaps for that reason, they often transcend disciplinary boundaries. It is my hope that drawing the connections between theorists and theories will also help encourage contemporary scholars to adopt more complex views of humor, accounting not only for the rhetorical features of the text or its potential persuasive outcome, but on the processes of meaning-making. I will first present a brief overview of each humor motivation theory in order to set the stage for the theoretical merger.

FRAMEWORK: MOTIVATIONAL THEORIES

Incongruity theory, which is cognitive in nature, posits that amusement is derived from the unexpected. An interaction or experience may be perceived as humorous

because it contradicts individuals' past experiences, cognitive frameworks, or expectations. Incongruity, however, does not mean that events or experiences are most humorous if they are completely dissociated from reality: Incongruities are generally most amusing if they involve both an expectancy violation and a grain of truth (see Raskin 180). Incongruity reigned as the most popular strain of humor theory through the 18th and 19th centuries (Herrick 14) and is still the most favored lens of humanities scholars (Boskin and Dorinson 105).

It is understandable that relief theory is favored by psychoanalysis and psychology scholars (Boskin and Dorinson 105) because of its focus on affect. Relief theory posits that amusement is derived from the release of built-up emotion: As Raskin explains, "the basic principle of all such theories is that laughter provides relief for mental, nervous, and/or psychic energy and thus ensures homeostasis after a struggle, tension, strain, etc." (38). Amusement of this sort can represent a way to cope with a disturbing situation, a face-saving strategy during a moment of embarrassment, a form of disguised aggression, or other method of channeling various negative emotions. Although Freud is the primary scholarly figure associated with this theory, many other humor theorists also refer to the relationship between amusement and emotion.

The final motivational theory, superiority, has yet to be adopted as the primary humor mechanism of any disciplinary community. This is perhaps because superiority theory may course through humor that has elements of incongruity or relief (see, for example, Billig 76; LaFave, Haddad, and Maesen 89). Superiority theory posits that humor involves malice, derision, aggression, or disparagement (see Raskin 36). The object of derision may vary greatly from an individual target, to a set of ideologies, to a

social structure. Amusement, as seen through the lens of superiority theory, emerges from elevated feelings of self-worth that result after humorous symbolic denigration of an external target.

The motivational theories are not discrete and several scholars have argued that they should be seen as complementary. For example, Raskin explains:

> The three approaches actually characterize the complex phenomenon of humor from very different angles and do not at all contradict each other – rather they seem to supplement each other quite nicely. In our terms, the incongruity-based theories make a statement about the stimulus; the superiority theories characterize the relations or attitudes between the speaker and the hearer; and the release/relief theories comment on the feelings and psychology of the hearer only. (40)

The humor motivation theories are intended to explain why people experience amusement so Raskin's description of incongruity theory as related only to a stimulus exposes a potential weakness in incongruity theory – it fails to consider the audience, the amused party. Taking a different position, Morreall argues that all three theories are premised on change for the "laugher:" There may be a cognitive change according to incongruity theory, an affective change accounted for by relief theory, and both a cognitive and affective change in the case of superiority theory (38-39). In sum, Raskin asserts that each theory refers to a different part of the humorous communication model (focusing on stimulus and receiver), whereas Morreall focuses on how the speaker may experience changes that evoke amusement.

The connection I draw between the theories is more in line with Morreall's thinking. Raskin alludes to a notable weakness in incongruity theory: It is a broader phenomena that is at the root of many humorous texts and experiences, yet incongruity alone doesn't explain why a text or experience evokes amusement. I think that humor

must also have an affective component that improves positive feelings. It is also important to note that relief and superiority often occur together, for when humor includes a power differential there is a release of emotion. The following model illustrates the connection I see between the theories:

Incongruity → Relief

(or)

Incongruity → Relief/Superiority

This model is similar to the theories Freud proposed about innocent and tendentious jokes. He explains that innocent jokes do not have an aim or goal, while tendentious jokes involve some aggressiveness (*Jokes* 96-100) Accordingly, Freud explains that innocent jokes evoke only moderate pleasure (thereby connecting incongruity and relief), while tendentious jokes evoke heartier laughter (connecting incongruity, relief, and superiority) and may be used in symbolic rebellion against various forms of authority (see Freud *Jokes* 96; 105). Again, we see that the boundaries between the humor trajectories tend to blur. Freud acknowledges that not all jokes involve aggression or superiority, but the ones that do provide us with *more* relief than those that are "innocent."

For examples of these connections, we can look to the time-worn "why did the chicken cross the road" joke genre. The first example is innocent, utilizing an incongruous play on words and no specific target:

Q: Why did the Roman chicken cross the road?

A: She was afraid someone would Caesar (Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road Website December 12, 2007).

This second example is a fictitious account of President George W. Bush's response to "why did the chicken cross the road?" In this joke, there is an incongruity between President George W. Bush's serious answer and the common silly responses to the question. But the joke can also be considered tendentious as it involves a parody of the President's vocal stylings and his foreign policy explanations:

> Q: Mr. President, why did the chicken cross the road?
>
> A: Look, it's tough crossing the road. The chicken knows it's tough. The American people have got to understand that I know the chicken knows it's tough. I read the report. But the chicken is on the march. And it will get the job done (Chicken Joke Website December 12, 2007).

In summary, these two chicken joke examples illustrate Freud's classifications of innocent and tendentious jokes. The humor motivational theories of incongruity and relief are part of the processes of amusement in innocent jokes, while all three theories (incongruity, relief, and superiority) course through tendentious jokes.

By positioning the humor motivation theories with their other counterparts – literary theories as sender/stimulus and rhetorical theories as receiver/response – in the following pages, I will craft a more cohesive theoretical understanding of the model of humorous communication.

THEORY DIALOGUING: SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE

Although this chapter is mostly a-chronological, I will begin each section by discussing the ancient Greek and Roman roots of the humor theories. Although several contemporary scholars have stated that ancient rhetorical philosophers Plato, Aristotle,

Cicero, and Quintilian emphasized superiority theory (see, for example, Billig 38-50; Chapman and Foot 1; Gilbert 324; Lynch 426), I uncover elements of all three humor motivational theories in their writings. Tracing back all three motivational theories to the ancient philosophers helps map out a more holistic picture of the theories, situating them in relation to one another, not as discrete elements. In addition to discussing the writings of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, this chapter also draws from the work of George Campbell, Thomas Hobbes, Mikhail Baktin, Sigmund Freud, Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth, Soren Kierkegaard, Salvatore Attardo, Roger Kreuz, and others in order to build this cohesive and comprehensive understanding of humor theory from stimulus to response.

Incongruity Theory

Incongruity as Humor Motivation

Engel traces incongruity theory back to Sophistic wit, which shows "a fleetness and brilliance with which they are able somehow to shock and paralyze the minds of those who venture to do battle with them" (227). Unfortunately, we cannot grasp the full extent of that Greek influence because the second book of Aristotle's Poetics, a book purportedly based on humor, no longer exists. Several scholars, including Janko and Cooper, have attempted to reconstruct the lost book from surviving documents that referenced the original manuscript. Janko's reconstructed version includes incongruity as a key piece in Aristotle's original comic theories, arguing that humor is derived primarily from the illogical and the unexpected (95). These irrational humorous statements or acts function to transform and distort reality (Janko 95). According to Herrick, many scholars, including George Campbell, Lord Kames, and Thomas Twining believed that Aristotle's

existing works gesture toward incongruity as a key component of humor (14-15). Indeed, Campbell opines that when Aristotle discusses the "Ridiculous" in *The Rhetoric,* he is primarily highlighting "an incongruous combination" in character or conduct (50).

Compared to the Aristotelian writings, the surviving works of the Romans place even more emphasis on incongruity. In *De Oratore,* Cicero describes various methods through which the illogical and unexpected may be utilized in humor. He catalogues different types of comedy including mimicry, ridiculousness, distortion of features, indecency of language, and deceived expectation (II.LXII-II.LXIII). The first four types belong to the realm of buffoonery, an unintelligent form of humor that is unbecoming to an orator. The latter type of joke, deceived expectation (akin to incongruity) is seen as the quintessential type of humor. It is not only the most common form of comedy, but the funniest: Cicero states in *De Oratore*, "of all jokes none create greater laughter than something said contrary to expectation; of which there are examples without number" (II.LXX). Laughter of the incongruous kind, Cicero explains, springs from our feelings of surprise after having been primed to anticipate a different outcome in an interaction or event (II.LXIII-II.LXIV). Even noted superiority theorist Thomas Hobbes highlights the primacy of incongruity in humorous exchanges. He explains: "[F]orasmuch as the same thing is no more ridiculous when it groweth stale or unusual, whatsoever it be that moveth laughter, it must be new and unexpected" (54).

An orator who is able to wittily deceive expectation should be adjudged intelligent and skillful. Furthermore, a speaker who has crafted an intelligent and serious public persona, but chooses to engage in jest, will evoke even stronger feelings of

amusement from an audience compared to someone who appears less intelligent and jests often. Cicero explains through the mouthpiece of Antonius:

> [H]e who would be a facetious speaker, must be endowed with a natural genius for such kinds of wit, as well as with personal qualifications, so that his very look may adapt itself to every species of the ridiculous; and the graver and more serious such a person is, as is the case with you, Crassus, so much more humorous do the sayings which fall from him generally appear. (II. LXXI)

Campbell concurs that "a serious manner commonly adds energy to a joke" (44). It is through an incongruity not only among a speaker's statements, but between the tenor of a speaker's statements and the speaker's character that an audience can be startled into laughter.

Cicero and Quintilian both describe more distinct forms of incongruity that involve misrepresenting one's own views or the views of another person. I will include references to modern comedy to provide additional clarity when explaining these particular forms of incongruity. Cicero's term "ironical dissimulation" is a fitting description of the contemporary humor of Stephen Colbert and his faux conservative persona on *The Colbert Report*. Cicero explains, "Ironical dissimulation has also an agreeable effect, when you say something different from what you think . . . when through the whole course of a speech you are seriously jocose, your thoughts being different from your words" (II.LXVII). When one affects a false persona as Colbert does, everything that comes out of one's mouth is necessarily non-serious, often a mockery of beliefs held by others.

Other Comedy Central programs have also adopted comedic strategies that can be traced back to the ancient Romans. For example, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*

infuses a serious setting – a news program – with entertainment value, much like Cicero did in his "Defense of Caelius." Volpe analyzes the defense noting,

> While Cicero emphasized the serious business of the jury to protect the state from dangerous citizens, he proceeded to entertain the jurors with every trick of oratory so that the trial became a better show than the games at the arena. (314)

News and politics are also serious affairs, but *The Daily Show* has effectively spun them into entertainment by highlighting elements of the ridiculous and making the audience feel "even better than being informed" (*The Daily Show* Website).

The Daily Show's outrageous correspondents adopt a more Quintilian approach in that they try to verbally paint the interviewees into a corner by reinterpreting the interviewee's words or quoting them out of context. In *Institutes of Oratory* Quintilian describes "taking the words of another in a sense different from that in which he uses them" as a witty form of deceiving expectation (VI.III.49). Whether one is misrepresenting their own thoughts or the thoughts of another, these elements of incongruity I have described have clear parallels with the broader concept of irony. That is where we will turn next – irony as a stimulus of amusement through incongruity, and the invited responses to that incongruous amusement.

Incongruity Stimulus and Response: Irony, Perspective by Incongruity and the Comic Frame

Quintilian is credited with defining irony, which evolved out of the term *eironeia* from the comic plays of Aristophanes (Colebrook 1-2). He describes irony as a type of allegory in "which what is expressed is quite contrary to what is meant" (VIII.VI. 54), a definition that is consistent with the contemporary understanding of irony. The defining feature of this rhetorical trope, according to Kierkegaard, Burke, and Olson and Olson, is

similar to Socratic irony: irony involves an irresolvable dialectic tension. Kierkegaard describes irony as analogous to Hegel's concept of the negative in that it has dialectical properties that build toward knowledge. Kierkegaard explains that through questioning (the "Socratic method"), irony becomes an "activator" or a "stimulus for thought" that leads from abstraction into truth (121). In his words, reality "acquires its validity . . . as history in which consciousness successively matures" (328).

Burke categorizes irony as one of the four master tropes, and describes it in a manner that is consonant with Kierkegaard's dialectical approach. Burke states that irony involves an interaction of terms that are "all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another" (*Grammar* 512). He explains that the end result of the interaction is something that transcends the initial ingredients: "what goes forth as A returns as non-A" (*Grammar* 517). These descriptions of irony do not seem connected to humor and indeed, irony is not necessarily humorous. It is a protean rhetorical form, however, because whereas irony is not always humorous, it is a key ingredient to much humor and is a building block of parody and satire. One parallel between irony and humor can be seen with the developmental meaning creation involved in the use of irony: I argue that it is similar to the dialectical process of meaning-making with humorous discourse. Humorous discourse does not transfer meaning to its audience; instead, the interaction between an audience and humorous discourse results in the stimulation or co-creation of meaning.

Allowing for divergent power relations in the use of irony, Burke explains that there is "true," humble irony, and irony that involves superiority. He describes true irony as that which "really does justify the attribute of 'humility'" and "is not 'superior' to the

enemy" (*Grammar* 514). One engaged in the true ironic dialectic can "*never* be superior, for he must realize that he also *needs this particular foolish character as one of the necessary modifiers* (*Grammar* 515, emphasis in original). With this statement about the humility and social-connectedness of irony, we see parallels between the Burkean dialectic of irony and the comic frame that is used as a gentle social corrective.

According to Burke any type of social conflict or hardship necessitates that one alter or adapt their existing orientation toward reality – the way that they order and respond to the world. A change in orientation may be accomplished through negotiating discursive incongruities, which Burke labels perspective by incongruity, or by pointing out the incongruities in the attitudes or actions of another party and utilizing frames of acceptance or rejection As irony and much humor generally involve incongruous discursive collisions, perspective by incongruity can account for the ways in which individuals may apprehend meaning from such texts (Bostdorff 45). Similarly, frames of acceptance and rejection can help explain how discursive incongruities may alter attitudes and actions on a societal level.

Burke explains that perspective by incongruity involves using language and symbols in ways that are inconsistent with their past use (see, for example *Permanence* 90). Perspective by incongruity may also be understood as "exorcism by misnomer" or a casting out of "demons by a vocabulary of *conversion,* by an *incongruous* naming" (*Permanence* 133). Vocabularies and discursive systems are part of a complex structure that influences attitudes and actions; therefore, perspective by incongruity may result in social change. Burke explains that "any new way of putting the characters of events together is an attempt to convert people" (*Permanence* 87). In other words, Burke is

optimistic about the potential for social change that may result from discursive incongruities. A symbolic inconsistency, whether humorous or non-humorous, may encourage individuals to interrogate their orientations and assumptions in order to make sense of the incongruity.

A change in orientation may also be enacted on a broader scale by publicly airing the incongruities in another party's attitudes or actions. Whereas perspective by incongruity may be seen as an individual strategy of altering orientations, Burke's frames of acceptance and rejection focus on society, elucidating "patterns of conflict typical of actual human associations" (Duncan *Permanence* Intro xxx). Burke's comic strategy, or frame, involves social actors' acceptance of the given social order and a desire to peacefully change those who have deviated by "picturing people not as *vicious,* but as *mistaken*" (*Attitudes* 41). This strategy hearkens back to Burke's ideas about irony not involving a hierarchy of dialectical partners but a mutualistic relationship that views each party as a "necessary modifier."

In the comic frame, deviates are rhetorically constructed as clowns, and thus invited to set themselves straight and rejoin the social order. In this manner, conflict is "bridged symbolically" without the need for a physical confrontation (*Attitudes* 28). Burke argues that the comic frame elevates a heroic character and promotes acceptance of the foundational principles of society by "making the hero's character as great as the situation he confronts" (*Attitudes* 43). The hero appears mighty and non-heroic individuals identify with the hero vicariously, thus experiencing self-empowerment. The effective comic strategy will instill a greater sense of agency in the people and provide

them with hope for dealing with existing hardships. Of all the acceptance frames, Burke lauds the comic as the most "humane" (*Attitudes* 42).

Burke's comic frame has been employed by rhetorical critics to explain the effectiveness of several social movements and non-violent agitation strategies that were seen as working within existing social values to bring about legal and political change (see, for example, Carlson "Gandhi;" Carlson "Limitations;" Christiansen and Hanson; Powell). Other critical scholars have employed a more liberal interpretation of the comic frame, applying it to texts that involve jokes or comedy that the authors claim induce ideological change (see, for example, Cooper and Pease; Murphy; Shugart; Smith and Voth).

Although incongruity is an important element in humor and, potentially, social change, many contemporary humor scholars argue that incongruity theory does not provide a comprehensive view of amusement by itself (see, for example, Billig; Bostdorff; LaFave et al.; Veale; Wyer and Collins). According to LaFave and colleagues, successful humor must involve other elements such as the "happiness increment" in order to evoke mirth (86). Furthermore, many rhetorical scholars have argued that there are weaknesses in the efficacy of the comic frame (see, for example, Carlson "Limitations"). Successful social change may require more aggressive discursive and extra-discursive measures. Even Burke himself acknowledged that acceptance frames may become "drastically inadequate" if they encourage society to adjust to an unfavorable social order (*Attitudes* 28 and 39). As stated earlier, I also agree that incongruity is a root characteristic of humor, but not a comprehensive account of humor motivation, nor an

effective strategy of social change. Next, we will begin a discussion of the imperative affective and audience-centered components of humor, beginning with relief theory.

Relief Theory

Relief as Humor Motivation

Relief theory is most often associated with Freud because *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* was integral in developing the comprehensive theory; however, Plato's *Philebus* lays the philosophical groundwork for the interplay of positive and negative emotion that lies at the heart of relief theory. Furthermore, in Quintilian's classifications of various types of humor in *Institutes of Oratory*, he describes a cathartic strain of laughter that has clear parallels with contemporary manifestations of relief theory. These ancient theories prime the way for studying the affective components of humor, which modern humor scholars believe to be an important variable in humor appreciation (see Wicker, Barron, and Willis).

In the dialogue *Philebus,* Plato describes an intricate philosophy of the relationship between pleasure and pain. Although pleasure may not be directly equated with laughter, Plato considers "folly" to be a cause of pleasure (63E). What is perhaps most relevant to humor theory in this dialogue is Plato's concept of the "mixed pleasures of the soul" (47D-50E). He explains that humans will never be able properly to examine pleasure apart from pain, arguing that pleasure is released through the process of ridding oneself of pain: "[W]hen the natural state of a living organism . . . is destroyed, that destruction is pain; conversely, when such organisms return to their own true nature, this reversion is invariably pleasure" (32B). This description of pleasure primes the

theoretical ground for relief theory by acknowledging that amusement may only be experienced through dialectical tension with pain.

Quintilian and Cicero did not universally applaud humor as a rhetorical device but they both believed that it *could* be a highly persuasive tool of a skilled rhetor (Quintilian *Institutes* VI.III.6). Humor's most notable persuasive power, according to the two Romans, is reversal of negative affect. Quintilian describes laughter as a passionate and almost magical emotion that can break a disagreeable disposition:

> [Laughter] bursts forth in people even against their will, and extorts a confession of its influence not only from the face and the voice, but shakes the whole frame with its vehemence. It often changes, too, as I said, the tendency of the greatest affairs as it very frequently dissipates both hatred and anger. (*Institutes* VI.III.9)

In this manner, humor can be used to ease tension and prepare people for rational discussion. Quintilian argued that humor collects the mind's "powers" and "reviv[es] it after disgust and fatigue" in order to dispel "melancholy affections" (VI.III.1).

Freud saw humor as having revolutionary potential, for its affective weaponry may help in the subversion of socially repressive forces. Briefly explained, Freudian relief theory is based on psychical energy expenditure: Humor yields enjoyment by converting "unpleasure" into pleasure (similar to the Roman "reversal of affect"). As with many Freudian theories, humor was seen as a response to forces of social repression, which censor and limit enjoyment. Freud explains, "Reason, critical judgement [*sic*], suppression – these are the forces against which it [humor] fights in succession; it holds fast to the original sources of pleasure for itself by lifting inhibitions" (*Jokes* 137-138).

The process of humorous energy relief, or cathexis, is buried in the unconscious, which is also the realm of dreams. Strachey speculates that Freud was inspired to write

about jokes due to their curious presence in many dreams (3). Indeed, Freud worked on the manuscripts for *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and *The Interpretation of Dreams* simultaneously (Strachey 5). Just as dreams have ambiguous psychical properties, Freud posited that we rarely know what we are laughing at in a joke, but that we may discover it through "analytic investigation" (*Jokes* 154).

Freud describes the inner-workings of the psychical relief mechanism with more detail in a 1927 essay "Humour," utilizing his structural model of the psyche. He explains that particular types of humor can represent "the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability" ("Humour" 162). Because one may not always control external sources of unpleasure, humor enables the psyche to conceive of traumas as a chance for amusement – to essentially laugh in the face of reality. Freud cites an example also utilized in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* to support his point: "A criminal who was being led out to the gallows on a Monday remarked: 'Well, the week's beginning nicely'" ("Humour" 161). In this example and other instances in which individuals joke about their own unfortunate circumstances, we see the super-ego "repudiating reality and serving an illusion" ("Humour" 166). The super-ego has crafted a faux sense of satisfaction, which will allow the ego to experience pleasure.

Several psychological studies have found support for Freud's relief theories of emotional discharge and humor. For example, Dworkin and Efran conclude that humor reduces feelings of anger, while Martin observes that exposure to comedy can result in an increased pain threshold (Dworkin and Efran 100-101; Martin 514). Singer also conducted a fascinating study in 1963 with African American male participants, most of whom were members of civil rights activism groups. He found that both hostile humor

related to segregation and neutral humor about the "plight of the average man" reduced participants' feelings of tension and aggression (Singer 108-110 and 119-123).

Relief Stimulus and Response: Parody, Satire, Signifying, and Dwarfing the Situation

As Table 2.1 illustrates, the motivational, stimulus, and response theories become increasingly muddy as we move into relief and superiority for those two motivations often work together. The affective interplay of pain and pleasure described in relief theory also helps explain the appeal of using humor as a vehicle of aggressiveness. Freud illustrates this connection as he discusses relief in conjunction with tendentious jokes. Similarly, Plato explains how deprecation is used in the service of positive affect: "[W]hen we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, we are mixing pleasure this time with malice, mixing, that is, our pleasure with pain" (49E-50A). Humor may thus be seen as a defensive or offensive strategy.

After describing relief motivational theory on its own terms in the previous section, I will now address the stimuli of parody and satire, which may lead to amusement that is premised on both relief and superiority. Finally, in the response section of relief theory, I will address Burke's theories of the social role of "humor" (remembering again that the comic frame does not necessarily involve humor and that Burke constructs humor and the comic frame as polar opposites). Burke takes a decidedly negative stance on humor when it only relieves one's pain temporarily, describing the effects deprecatingly as "dwarfing the situation."

To begin, it is essential to note that satire, parody, and irony are closely related to one another and can all be considered sub-sets of humor. I have listed these concepts in a particular order to account for their nested relationship: Satire may be built on parody

and/or irony, parody may also involve irony, and irony is a broader rhetorical device that is not always humorous (Attardo 124-125).

Satire can be defined as an artistic strategy that ridicules the values it claims to promote on the surface. Satire aims to "comment on a state of the world" and is derisive or mocking in tone, typically focusing on the shortcomings of society, not individuals (see Griffin 1; Kreuz and Roberts 102). Test describes satire as a "creative assault" (4) and Northrop Frye has labeled it "militant irony" (quoted in Test 17). One may discern from Frye's phrase that whereas satire is a rhetorical strategy with ideological and political ends, irony is simply a rhetorical device that may be used to accomplish a variety of rhetorical goals. As Gring-Pemble and Watson observe, irony may be used in the service of satire, a combination that they refer to as ironic satire (138). Like irony, satire also involves a tension between the surface message and the true (derisive) meaning that the speaker intends. These tensions open up a space for speaker and audience to potentially negotiate a meaning that utilizes their orientations or conceptions of the social world. Of course, individuals' methods of ordering and understanding the world may conflict and various ironical tensions do not always lend themselves well to an agreed upon meaning, thus leading to the unstable or polysemic quality of much irony, satire, and ironic satire.

Parody, forms of which may be connected to satire and irony, is defined as a ridiculous imitation, involving what Booth describes as a "doubled external reference" (123). As Attardo explains, parody involves intertextuality, for in order to fully enjoy the parody, one must be familiar with the text, person, or form that is being parodied (87). Like many examples of satire, irony and incongruities may also constitute the building

blocks of parody. Furthermore, some parodies may involve satire, resulting in parodic satire (or satiric parody). Kreuz and Roberts tease out the differences between the two comic forms, noting that "parody is only satiric when the target extends beyond one person or style" (104). In other words, if parody engages in social commentary as it imitates a particular person or style, it can blend with satire.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes Signifying as similar to parody in that it draws from other texts in the Black literary tradition (xxvii). He tells the story of the Signifying Monkey who is intent on demystifying the Lion's self-imposed status as King of the Jungle (56). This progressive rhetorical form has been used at least since slavery times in order to symbolically overcome White racist oppression. Gates explains that motivated Signifying or parody works to rhetorically create a space in which the Lion's hubris is exploited as stupidity and the social hierarchy is re-ordered (124). Gates describes the dozens as the most well-known contemporary manifestation of Signifying (99), which brings together humor irony, satire, and word play to ultimately function as "teachy but not preachy" (94).

Although Gates and others praise humorous literary forms such as Signifying, satire, and parody as potentially progressive, Burke condemns the impotence of humor. In opposition to the comic strategy of empowering a heroic figure and encouraging others to identify with that figure, Burke claims that humor emphasizes the "feebleness of those in the situation by *dwarfing the situation"* (*Attitudes* 43, emphasis in original). He cites the example of soldiers who employ "trench humor" in order to maintain "trench morale" as an example of dwarfing the situation (*Attitudes* 20). Humor, thus provokes an attitude of "happy stupidity" (*Attitudes* 43) and diminishes individuals' perceptions of their

capacity for social change. Burke further notes that mocking another person (through humor) generally involves identification between the amused party and the victim of laughter, thus lowering the character of both (*Rhetoric* 226; see also Duncan 24). Even when humor often involves the violation of social codes, a Freudian description of the role of humor in society, Burke argues that humor is ultimately stultifying: "Impropriety can provoke laughter only because at one remove it reaffirms the very propriety it violates" (*Rhetoric* 226). Overall, Burke explains that humor is conservative in that it "not only leaves one favored judgment completely intact, but deliberately strengthens it" (*Permanence* 112).

Ernst Kris and Freud believed that humor could provide one with freedom from repression and reduce negative feelings, but they too questioned the overall efficacy of using humor as a method of social change because they saw its positive effects as fleeting (see Kris 186). Freud considered humor to be a mature defense mechanism that effectively numbs the pain for a time, but does not face the underlying psychical causes of emotional discord. He explains:

> Defensive processes are the psychical correlative of the flight reflex and perform the task of preventing the generation of unpleasure from internal sources. In fulfilling this task they serve mental events as an automatic regulation, which in the end, incidentally, turns out to be detrimental and has to be subjected to conscious thinking. (*Jokes* 233)

For all of his praise of humor as a form of rebellion, Freud also cautions that humor can lead to complacency about social conditions. He urges that "one must not fulfil [sic] the demands of one's own needs illegitimately, but must leave them unfulfilled, because only the continuance of so many unfulfilled demands can develop the power to change the order of society" (*Jokes* 110). In this passage, Freud suggests that humor perpetuates a

false sense of contentment, which is clearly not a permanent solution to personal or social problems. Interestingly, Freud's criticisms of humor, Burke's criticisms of humor, and Carlson's criticisms of the comic frame are strikingly similar: Humor and the Burkean comic frame don't change the underlying structures causing displeasure.

In the final theory of the humor motivation trifecta, the aggressive components of humor will be discussed and we will again look at some potentially powerful features of humor.

Superiority Theory

Superiority as Humor Motivation

Superiority theory is emphasized in the writings of the ancient philosophers: They describe not only the types of deprecatory jests, but why they are appealing. Plato and Aristotle are the primary figures to address the psychological inner-workings of derisive amusement. Aristotle provides this extended explanation:

> But since everything like and akin to oneself is pleasant, and since every man is himself more like and akin to himself than any one else is, it follows that all of us must be more or less fond of ourselves . . . . And because we are all fond of ourselves, it follows that what is our own is pleasant to all of us, as for instance our own deeds and words . . . . And since power over others is very pleasant, it is pleasant to be thought wise, for practical wisdom secures us power over others . . . . Again, since most of us are ambitious, it must be pleasant to disparage our neighbours as well as to have power over them. (*Rhetoric* 1371b17-30)

This detailed account of the path to pleasure shows that human inclinations to maintain a positive sense of self and to feel power over others are at the epicenter of humor motivation. Aristotle's theory is consistent with the more general self-serving bias, a

perceptual tendency that permeates the interpretation of human communication (see Adler and Rodman 41).

Plato offers a similar explanation for the appealing nature of power and pain when he describes his theory of mixed pleasures. He argues that pain and pleasure each have a place in the soul when one experiences not only amusement, but also anger, fear, and love (*Philebus* 50B). Likely influenced in part by Plato's *Philebus*, Quintilian connects the theory of mixed pleasure to superiority theory when he notes: "[W]hat is said or done foolishly, angrily, fearfully, are equally the objects of laughter; and thus the origin of it is doubtful, as *laughter* is not far from *derision*" (*Institutes* VI.III.7 emphasis in original). These three explanations of derisive amusement (Aristotelian, Platonic, and Quintilian) also connect to relief theory: In order for humor to provide relief, it must reinforce our positive sense of self.

The four ancient philosophers surveyed here also describe several types of scurrilous jest. Aristotle is often cited for his views on the "Ugly" and "Ridiculous" that are expressed in *Poetics.* He believes that comedy is "an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly" (1449a32-34). Quintilian theorized about the "ugly" by categorizing some jokes as "bitter" and "malicious," but he also describes a Freud-like dichotomy of innocent and harmful jokes when he offers that some may be "cheerful" and "inoffensive" (VI.III.27).

Freud dedicates many pages just to describing tendentious jokes, classifying them into four categories: obscene, hostile, cynical, and skeptical (*Jokes* 115). Obscene jokes, Freud explains, may be likened to smut in that they have a strong sexual component and

may help shrug off sexual repression (*Jokes* 97-101). He claims it is difficult for women, more so than men, to "enjoy undisguised obscenity" (perhaps because they are more likely to be a derided target in that humor), but we can all laugh "when a joke has come to our help" (*Jokes* 101). The other three categories of tendentious jokes are directed at powerful individuals, institutions, and ideologies. Hostile jokes represent a rebellion against authority figures such as political officials (*Jokes* 103). Cynical jokes attack broader seats of power including, "institutions, people in their capacity as vehicles of institutions, [and] dogmas of morality or religion" (*Jokes* 108). These jokes, Freud claims, challenge the "ruthless morality" laid down by "the few who are rich and powerful and who can satisfy their wishes at any time" (*Jokes* 110). Skeptical jokes threaten a less tangible form of power: the certainty of knowledge or truth (*Jokes* 115). Although Freud did not describe skeptical jokes as incongruous, they may be cross-classified as such.

Whereas Freudian discussions of tendentious jokes seem to focus on people and institutions in positions of power, what about the ethics of using humor against less powerful and potentially "innocent" targets? The ethics of humor use was an area of great concern for the ancient philosophers. Aristotle held hope that evoking laughter through the Ridiculous did not necessarily cause pain or harm to people. However, Cicero stated that comedy could capitalize on many different kinds of serious human imperfections, not just the "Ridiculous":

> The seat and as it were province of what is laughed at . . . lies in a certain offensiveness and deformity; for those sayings are laughed at solely or chiefly which point out and designate something offensive in an inoffensive manner. (*De Oratore* II.LVIII)

In this quote, Cicero argues that humor encases derision in a non-serious shield. Plato, however, sees beyond the veil, recognizing that humor can cruelly exploit human flaws: He judged laughter to be at times "violent" and derived of "ridicule and contempt" (*The Republic* III.388E - V.473C).

Thomas Hobbes is a noted superiority theorist and his ideas seem to borrow much from the philosophies expressed by Aristotle and Cicero. He believed that much amusement is derived from exposing the "infirmities of others," which sets off and highlights one's own abilities in comparison and evokes laughter from the "sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves" (54-55). Hobbes views the pain of being laughed at as support for this theory, for the laughter symbolizes that the subject of the joke is being "triumphed over" (55). Although humor that falls under the realm of superiority theory may be either hegemonic or counter hegemonic, denoting the reinforcement or dissolution of existing social hierarchies, there seems to be much concern about the safety of innocent victims of humorous deprecation.

By making someone else the object of humorous mockery (especially an undeserving victim), the joke-teller may also lose their own credibility (for a more in-depth account of the conditions under which humor becomes bad taste, see Morris). All of the philosophers surveyed here were skeptical about the efficacy of employing humor as a rhetorical strategy, for it may harm a rhetor's ethos. Quintilian cautions that before employing humor, one should consider: "*what his own character is; in what sort of cause he is to speak; before whom; against whom;* and *what he should say*" (*Institutes,* VI.III.28, emphasis in original). Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian most often describe tasteful, clever humor as wit, and, in contrast, referring to low comedy as

buffoonery. Even through a careful consideration of the rhetorical situation, as Quintilian suggests, it is not always possible to determine the fine line between wit and buffoonery. Cicero explains the rub:

> [W]e have to ask the same questions here as is asked on other points, 'How far the ridicule may be carried?' In this respect it is not only directed that the orator should say nothing impertinently, but also that, even if he can say any thing very ridiculously, he should avoid both errors, lest his jokes become either buffoonery or mimicry. (II.LIX)

Although Cicero had previously noted that a "jocose manner, too, and strokes of wit, give pleasure to an audience and are often of great advantage to the speaker," he suggests here that the most prudent rhetor will avoid the ridiculous (*De Oratore* II.LIV; II.LIX).

Out of all the philosophers discussed here, Cicero most vehemently and thoroughly condemned humor for its ethical pitfalls, but he also made what was perhaps the strongest attempt to differentiate between wit and buffoonery – the good and the bad. Aristotle viewed the boundary between wit and buffoonery to be very important, but only established general guidelines for witty orators, stating that irony was acceptable (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1419b3-8; see also Billig 45). Cicero explains in greater detail that while distorting language is acceptable, distorting one's body is suited to an actor, not an orator because "This kind of jesting . . . represents the morose, the superstitious, the suspicious, the vainglorious, the foolish . . . and such kind of characters we are to expose, not to assume" (*De Oratore* II.LXII). Synthesizing the musings of Aristotle and Cicero, appropriate humor, or wit, will likely involve only verbal jesting such as irony and will stay far away from causing others pain.

Freud was, overall, more optimistic about the use of humor as a discursive strategy, for there is potential strength in the ability to symbolically induce pain in others.

For example, Freud notes that joking makes it possible to be critical of an adversary: "A joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously" (*Jokes* 103). He further explains that jokes made against an enemy "guarantees them a reception with the hearer which they would never have found in a non-joking form, in spite of the truth they might contain" (*Jokes* 103). By weaving jokes out of truth, a speaker may disguise their message and make criticism more palatable for a wider audience. Humor can thus allow one to achieve "in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming [one's enemy]" (*Jokes* 103). In Bakhtin's writings on folk humor, he advances a similar claim about the interplay of emotional release and empowerment:

> Laughter liberates not only from the external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred of prohibitions, of the past, of power. (94)

Even though he was more effusive in his praise for humor (rather than his criticisms, Freud does address the issue of rhetorical sensitivity when using tendentious humor. According to Strachey, the theories in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* are based on a collection of Jewish anecdotes that Freud gathered for several years (4). Superiority theory today focuses on many types of potentially offensive jokes, including those based on religious, racial, ethnic, and gender differences. While Freud celebrated the liberatory potential of humor, he made the significant observation that tendentious jokes are most favorable when they are made against the joke-teller's in-group. Freud explains:

> The jokes made about Jews by foreigners are for the most part brutal comic stories in which a joke is made unnecessary by the fact that Jews are regarded by foreigners as comic figures. The Jewish jokes which originate from Jews admit this too; but they know their real faults as well as the connection between them and their good qualities . . . . (*Jokes* 110)

The audience, especially if they identify with the target of the joke, must perceive good intentions on behalf of the joke teller.

Kris elaborates that the enjoyment of deprecatory humor depends not only on the source of the joke, but on the audience's dissociation from the object of the joke (214). He calls this the double-edged character of comedy, which can cause discomfort instead of pleasure (214). Zillmann and Cantor develop a similar theory in their essay entitled "A Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth." Throughout various studies, the authors observed that humor appreciation is altered depending on one's identification with the disparaged person or persons. Resentment toward a particular person or group can enhance humor appreciation in deprecatory comedy. Wicker et al. examined several variables influencing humor ratings, including the degree of liking the joke victim and the status differential between the disparaging and disparaged person. Their results indicate that deprecatory humor toward a disliked joke victim or toward high status people are rated as funnier (707-708). In sum, one must be seen as deserving of a humorous attack in order for that humor to be seen as acceptable and amusing.

Superiority Theory Response: Carnivalesque and the Burlesque Frame

This section will focus solely on the rhetoric theories of responses to disparaging humor. The stimuli that were covered in the relief section (parody and satire) are also applicable here as well and would just involve repeated descriptions. The theory of the carnivalesque represents a fruitful starting point that illustrates the interlinked nature of

the humor motivations and their social responses. As Bakhtin eloquently explains: "Laughter was sent to earth by the devil, but it appeared to men under the mask of joy, and so they readily accepted it. Then laughter cast away its mask and looked at man and at the world with the eyes of angry satire" (38). The mask of joy represents relief and pure amusement, yet lurking under that mask are the eyes of malice. In other words, there can be no pure innocent emotional release without superiority.

The carnivalesque describes a shared public performance that involves ritual spectacle and a suspension of hierarchy (Bakhtin 10; Olbrys "Disciplining" 242). The social impact of the interactive and frequently humorous public performances is unpredictable, owing to their ambiguous symbolic nature. In his ambitious article on "Carnivalesque Protest and the Humorless State," M. Lane Bruner attempts to settle the persuasive ambiguity, accounting for the "kinds of laughter" and the conditions under which humor can make "states healthier or sicker" (137). After a survey of global examples of carnivalesque and their resulting outcomes, Bruner concludes that the humorless state often has little trouble countering various kinds of carnivalesque protest with violence, which results in a small window of opportunity for progressive forms of carnivalesque to undermine the self-interests of oppressive governments (148, 151).

Although Bruner is skeptical about the efficacy of social change using humor, Burke discusses the burlesque frame as a potentially fruitful method of changing the social order. The burlesque frame stresses rejection, and in this poetic category, the one who is to be changed is not depicted as mistaken but as "despicable" (*Attitudes* 53). The artist of the burlesque highlights the flaws of the enemy and aims to not add any sympathy to the portrayal (*Attitudes* 54-55). Burke considers this caricature of behavior

to be an incomplete and poorly rounded frame. As such, he suggests that although collective society can occasionally appreciate burlesque, it is not likely to be the "*piece de resistance* for a steady diet" (*Attitudes* 54).

According to critics, the burlesque frame has been used to rhetorically construct many despicable buffoons. These buffoons include the "true woman" and misogynist man of the late 19th century (Carlson "Limitations"), Whites during the struggle for civil rights (Selby), President Reagan's Interior Secretary James Watt (Bostdorff), and Vice President Dan Quayle (Moore). Carlson ("Limitations") and Selby both describe how the burlesque frame's scathing critique of an enemy (men and Whites, respectively) diminished the perceived power of that enemy to stand in the way of social change (see Carlson 317; Selby 142). While the previous essays applied the burlesque frame to literature, public address, and political commentary, Bostdorff focuses specifically on political cartoons, opining that the burlesque is the most fitting frame through which to understand the entire genre. She ascribes this fittingness to burlesque's hybrid quality of perspective by incongruity and aggressive humor (46).

I will also point out that while the act of constructing a buffoon often utilizes incongruity for the purposes of deprecation, it may also result in the release of built-up emotion, thereby demonstrating the complementary nature of the three theories of humor motivation. For example, Selby explains how Ralph Abernathy's caricatures of Whites during the civil rights movement "provided a 'safe' emotional climate for him to articulate the injustices that had given rise to the protest" (139). Relief through amusement may disempower individuals and "dwarf the situation," but it also has the potential to empower through symbolic deprecation.

CONCLUSIONS

So what does this theory dialogue contribute to our understanding of stereotype-driven humorous mediated discourse? In order to summarize this chapter and situate it better within the broader scope of the dissertation, I will next discuss how the stimulus, motivation, and rhetorical theories of humor can apply to *Chappelle's Show* sketches. I focus first on the literary classifications of humor and their related humor motivations, before addressing the social responses. I conclude by discussing the importance of reader/viewer meaning-making in not only discerning social response to the humor, but also in classifying the humor stimulus and motivation.

Irony and incongruity are prevalent throughout many of the *Chappelle's Show* sketches; indeed, all of the sketches that will be critiqued in-depth in Chapter 4 of this dissertation use varying degrees of irony or incongruity. "Clayton Bigsby: Blind White Supremacist" serves as one of the most obvious examples of humor premised (in large part) on irony because vehement White supremacist Bigsby is Black. This sketch, and most *Chappelle's Show* sketches may also be considered ironic satires, however, due to their social commentary. Many viewers that I interviewed interpreted "Clayton Bigsby" to be a commentary on the ridiculousness of racism. Other notable examples of ironic satire include "Two Legal Systems," "Stereotype Pixies," both of which will be analyzed in Chapter 4, and "White Opera Singer," a sketch from season one in which Chappelle has a White female opera performer sing his thoughts on social issues and discrimination in order to make them more palatable to a White audience. Depending on the individual viewers, the social climate, and textual features, these examples of irony or ironic satire may induce social change through perspective by incongruity or through the application

of a comic frame that treats prejudiced individuals as its "clown." Or, if the textual features and viewer's orientations interact in a different way, perhaps the outcome will be one of dwarfing the situation, of complacency with conditions of discrimination, or of deprecating laughter toward racist stereotypes.

Parodies also populate the *Chappelle's Show* landscape. One of the most notable is the Samuel Jackson Beer commercial that parodies the actor's thunderous voice and memorable brazen movie lines. In many other sketches, the parodies can be considered satiric for they have an external reference that transcends one person or one form. For example, the "Mad Real World" sketch borrows from the form of the long-running MTV program *The Real World*, but the explicit target of the imitation is the perceived racism in the show and the castmate interactions that have resulted in an African American being voted off the show. The sketch accomplishes this by altering the racial proportions of the cast and having one White male live with "six of the craziest White people you could find." The "Race Draft" may also be seen as a parodic satire in that it borrows from the format of the NFL draft, but also comments on the social tendency to stereotype and classify people by their race or ethnicity.

It is important to note that the previously cited examples (and many others) cannot be definitively classified as satires, parodies, ironies, ironic satires, or parodic satires. Even ironies seem simple to diagnose on the surface, but some can be considered unstable according to literary scholar Wayne Booth. Some of Booth's explanations for ironic polysemy include ignorance and prejudice (222), essential elements in our understanding of humor that is premised on racial stereotypes.

This ambiguity again gestures toward the importance of viewer interpretation. "Samuel Jackson Beer," and "R. Kelly's (I Wanna) Pee on You" sketches imitate the celebrities' artistic styles, but do not seem (from my perspective) to involve a derisive, external social commentary. But could a viewer potentially read social commentary into the parody? Surely it is possible even if the sketches do not seem to make an overt social statement. For example, the Samuel Jackson sketch may be perceived as a commentary on the lack of diversity in the acting roles made available to Jackson – he often plays an angry and violent character. The R. Kelly sketch may read as implicit commentary about the preferential legal treatment afforded to celebrities for R. Kelly was not quickly prosecuted for sexual assault of a minor even though there was video footage of the altercation.[1]

Just as it is difficult to classify a text as an irony, ironic satire, parody, or parodic satire, so is it difficult to discern why a text is amusing (or not) and what the effect of that text will be on individuals and society. Burke's theories on perspective by incongruity, humor, and frames of acceptance and rejection have been used in productive ways by rhetorical critics. But in relation to the polysemic, potentially offensive, or progressive type of humor I am examining, I am left wondering: If humorous incongruity reinforces the status quo, why is perspective by incongruity a celebrated method of 'casting out demons?' Also, if the status quo has been upheld and the deviate clown does not take his/her invitation to change their behavior and rejoin the social order, does the comic

[1] This issue is also the subject of another sketch in which Chappelle proclaims Kelly's innocence and says that it would take two forms of government ID, witnesses taking notes, and R. Kelly's grandmother identifying the suspect in order for him to be convinced of Kelly's guilt.

frame necessarily become just humor (see also Moore 108)? Under what conditions can the deviant be depicted as mistaken in order to effect social change? Under what conditions should they be portrayed as despicable?

The answer to all of these questions lies in the conditions surrounding the production and dissemination of the humor, and, perhaps more importantly, in the orientations of the viewers themselves. Booth theorizes that it is unlikely for ironic tropes to induce ideological shifts in readers. He argues that "every reader will have greatest difficulty detecting irony that mocks his [*sic*] own beliefs or characteristics" (81). It seems that the most influential missing piece in the equation of humor interpretation and effects is the viewers and their orientations. Although rhetorical criticism seems to be increasingly open-minded about considering the audience as an important factor in determining a text's persuasiveness, there is more to be done. In the next chapter, I will support that assertion by offering a more detailed assessment of humor scholarship and by presenting several themes that emerged from my survey of communication journal articles that critique humorous texts.

Chapter 3: *A Survey of Humor Criticism*

After situating previously disparate humor theories in dialogue with one another, this chapter will now examine how those theories have been appropriated to inform criticism of humorous mediated texts. I gathered many communication articles that address humorous mediated texts to do background research for this project, but I supplemented my sample for this chapter by searching for the terms "humor" and "comedy" utilizing the Communication and Mass Media Complete database. In order to keep the search manageable and to focus on articles that have likely had the greatest exposure, I limited my search to National Communication Association journals *Quarterly Journal of Speech, Critical Studies in Mass/Media Communication, Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, Text and Performance Quarterly,* and, because it is known for publishing humor scholarship, the *Western Journal of Communication*. After gathering the lengthy lists of articles from each journal, I supplemented artificial intelligence with human intelligence by reading through the articles to select only those that address humorous mediated texts (not humor or comedy in personal interactions).

In my survey of these articles, I noted three key areas: humor theory employed, methods (textual and/or audience-based), and conclusions about the role of humor in society. The categories were applicable to the vast majority of the articles, but it is important to note that some used their humorous texts to develop theories and did not form conclusions about the persuasiveness of the humor (see Bostdorff; Morris). The

Bostdorff and Morris articles were still kept in the analysis because they provided productive information about the use (and sometimes creation of) humor theory.

The areas I emphasize in the survey of humor criticism articles are also the focus of my dissertation – what theories and methods are used to critique humorous mediated texts and what conclusions are drawn about the persuasive power of those texts – and form the comprehensive basis for my recommended critical approach to humorous mediated texts. My central claim is that humorous mediated texts are premised on the intersections of incongruous discourses, which require viewers to employ their own orientations to negotiate the relationship between the discourses; therefore, it is essential for critics to engage in both textual analysis and audience-based studies of humorous mediated texts in order to more fully explicate the available meanings. As I will describe in the following pages, many critical examinations of humorous mediated texts do not consult viewers/readers (other than the critic him/herself) and/or fail to explicate various meaning sets that may be drawn from the text.

Before I begin describing trends that emerged in the theories, methods, and conclusions of the articles, I would first like to point out the challenging job awaiting critics of humorous texts. Bakhtin has called laughter and its forms "the least scrutinized sphere of people's creation" (4). Perhaps this is because of the difficulties of seriously critiquing a non-serious art. Billig notes that "the very task of analysis seems antithetical to humour" and "if one gets too serious about humour, then one can easily end up as a figure of ridicule – the earnest academic who simply didn't get the joke and is therefore unfit to study the topic" (15). Several of the authors surveyed here expressed concern over this conflict. For example, Goltz describes a tension he feels in his positions as both

a consumer of *Instinct* magazine and a scholarly critic. He is "simultaneously one of the 'boys' and the 'sad loser' academic who doesn't get the joke" (96).

Others perpetuate the potentially harsh climate for humor critics. For example, in his defense of Jon Stewart and the *Daily Show,* Bennett states, "despite the appeal of comic relief, many critics persist in taking it too seriously and then condemning it for not being serious enough" (279). More egregious is Gilbert's impertinent reminder to critics that "*these are the jokes, folks!*" (319, emphasis hers). As Don Imus learned the hard way, even statements intended as jokes are not always (and should not always be) immune to critical evaluation.

Because jokes and humor are imbued with ideologies that react in various ways with audience members' existing ideologies, it is important for critics of humorous texts to accept the risks of being seen as the "too serious" or "loser" academic. Some of the critics surveyed here embrace that role, demonstrating a willingness to condemn a humorous text, which can be particularly daunting if the text is very popular or evades others' critical radars. Researchers, too, may be subject to the force of social desirability. Other researchers, such as Bennett and Gilbert, seem to shy away from exposing the harmful social consequences of a text that is wrapped in a harmless humorous package. This tension is illustrative of the human component of criticism, which Brockriede highlights by noting the centrality of the person making choices to construct the criticism as argument (166). The personal feelings and biases of the critic are yet another reason that audience research is essential in humor criticism, for exposure to different viewpoints may encourage a critic to interrogate his/her own attitudes.

To be fair, many critics seem to praise the subversive potential of humorous texts, not because the non-serious genre is kryptonite to their critical sensibilities, but seemingly because of the merits of the messages or meanings they find in the humorous texts. Interestingly, the findings of this chapter mirror the ambiguity (or ambivalence) of humor itself: The conclusions about humor's positively or negatively valenced social impact were almost equally balanced between progressive and oppressive. Furthermore, I found few trends linking the theories or method used (whether textual, or audience-based) and the authors' conclusions about the text's social role (Burke's comic frame was the only exception). In other words, theory or method did not commonly dictate the authors' findings.

Even without a link between theory/method and findings (which I expected to find), three interesting themes still emerged from the survey of articles: 1. a lack of clarity in the use of humor motivational theories, 2. textual analysis combined with speculation about audiences and persuasion, and 3. largely ambivalent findings on humor's social impact. These themes illustrate weaknesses in humor scholarship and gesture toward areas for future improvement.

CLOUDY THEORETICAL LENSES: INCONGRUITY AND SUPERIORITY

Incongruity plays the most prevalent role in the humor essays. Although some authors do not draw explicitly from incongruity theory, they describe humor working in ways that fit incongruity motivation theory. In my categorization of the humor criticism pieces for this chapter, I make no differentiation between articles that overtly draw from a particular theory, and articles that use a theory incidentally. Similarly, in the other

categories of analysis – methods and conclusions about persuasiveness – I am also using my critical skills to interrogate the author's discourse, not necessarily just repeating the author's own labels for what he or she is finding or doing. For example, an author may not explicitly state that their text functions "hegemonically," but if he or she describes humor working to maintain a group's power or dominance then I have classified the conclusions as hegemonic.

In many articles, incongruity is linked to other theories discussed in Chapter 2 – parody, satire, and Burke's comic frame – suggesting that clarifying connections between the sets of theories is ultimately productive. Some of the common incongruities are those related to violations of normative gender roles (Battles and Hilton-Morrow; Hanke; Johnson; Palmer-Mehta; Shugart), challenges to constructions of sexual identity (Cooper and Pease; Goltz), contrasting societal expectations and images/actions of politicians (Bostdorff; Moore; Smith and Voth), or incongruities between entertainment and political participation (Olbrys "*Seinfeld's*"; Hariman; Bennett). For example, Shugart describes gender role subversion that is based in part on the "appearance of incongruities" between "Ellen Morgan's 'real' character'" (played by Ellen DeGeneres) and the stereotypically feminine characters she "grudgingly assumes" in several episodes of the sitcom *Ellen* (103). With different content, but similar form, Moore exposes public ambivalence toward the Vice Presidency through the incongruity between public dislike of status politics and Dan Quayle's ascension to that role as a seemingly privileged and incompetent figure (120-121). The humor in both examples is derived (at least in part) from the incongruity between normative role expectations and the role the television character or politician actually assume.

Within the realm of humorous incongruity, much ambiguity surrounds the constellation of related terms. The definitions of parody and satire lie in the eye of the beholder, yet the audience variable in the accurate application of such terms is often ignored in these examples of humor criticism. Olbrys describes *Seinfeld* as a satire: He argues that it satirizes liberal democracy as it "parodies contemporary public and political events" ("*Seinfeld's"* 400). Olbrys also describes *Seinfeld's* (and other satires') persuasive impact on the audience: "satire prods us to face our schemes and political ambitions with a language acceptable to a very wide audience" ("*Seinfeld's"* 401). With this statement about satire's persuasiveness, Olbrys makes an inferential leap between his classification of the humor on *Seinfeld* and its persuasiveness on the audience. Instead of marking satire is an audience-constructed label, Olbrys makes an opposite rhetorical move, which makes it seem that satire itself is received in the same way by a "very wide audience" ("*Seinfeld's"* 401).

In another example, Hanke labels the sitcoms *Home Improvement* and *Coach* "mock macho" because they engage in "light gender parody" (76 and 90). He explores polysemic responses to the purported parody, but by labeling the texts parodies, Hanke ignores the possibility that viewers take the texts at face value representations of masculinity. Similarly, Gilbert and Shugart describe female comedian's gender parodies without interrogating the application of the term. To her credit, Shugart theorizes about various audiences and their interpretations of Ellen DeGeneres' gender parody on the show *Ellen,* but she defines parody simply as an "imitation" and does not address the social-constructedness involved in accurately applying the label (97-99). Others such as

Jonathan Gray define parody and explore many of its qualities in-depth, but again, neglect the audience component of that definition.

In the exciting scholarly debate about the social impact of the *Daily Show's* political comedy (see volume 24, issue 3 of *Critical Studies in Media Communication*), Hariman brings the issue of interpretation and literary classification to light. He alleges that critics who condemn comedian Jon Stewart are "completely tone deaf regarding the parodic and satiric character of the show" (274). By describing his scholarly opponents as "tone deaf" Hariman alludes to the slippage possible in the decoding of parody and satire: they may only be "properly" received by particular audiences. Thus, we see the importance of audience reception in applying the labels of parody and satire for they exist only in the eye (or ear, or mind) of the beholder.

While humor is also in the eye of the beholder (one person can view a text or experience as amusing, and another can find it unamusing), the consequences for (mis)interpretations of parody and satire lie outside of the discourse. Instead of the simple dichotomy of amusing (if the audience member agrees that a text should be considered "humor") versus unamusing (if the audience member rejects the "humor" label), the labels of parody and satire indicate that a text or experience has an external reference, and includes commentary about a text, experience, or ideology outside of itself. If an audience member disagrees with a text being labeled a parody or satire, this means that their interpretations of the text and the consequent implications of the text will differ dramatically compared to if they agreed with the label of parody or satire.

The stakes of these unsupported literary classifications are high because much humor and humor critique addresses power and social relations: Power to define

normative identities, the power implications resulting from those definitions, the power to influence political figures and policies, and power to effect social change by other symbolic means. Parody, satire, and even incongruity can involve symbolic power struggles, yet few articles draw from superiority theory or acknowledge its importance in humor motivation. Olbrys is a notable exception: He performs an admirable survey of humor literature, explicitly situating his text within carnivalesque, grotesque, and burlesque traditions, while noting the incongruities that lie at the heart of the humor and the potential for cathartic pleasure for the audience ("Disciplining" 249). He thoughtfully describes the interplay of superiority and relief theory, noting that it is important to consider how comic rituals "unsympathetically yoke liberating laughter and invite audiences to delight in that disciplinary act" ("Disciplining" 241).

In their fascinating study of humor and racial stereotypes in *Rush Hour 2*, Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin "discuss how the genre of comedy privileges a reading of racial stereotypes as harmless, despite the potential negative consequences of such representations" (158). Using a method that is largely representative of the other articles surveyed here, the authors draw from research on generic conventions and criticism of other stereotypical comedic texts to support their conclusions, but fail to discuss the more specific aspects of power relations and humor. Superiority theory refers to the negotiation of power, not just the reification of existing structures of domination, so it can be a useful theoretical lens for essays that address the hegemonic or counter-hegemonic functions of humor.

The criticisms I have of scholars' uses of incongruity theory and superiority theory are different, but complementary. In the case of incongruity, it is used (along with

irony, parody, and satire) as a "catch all," without being properly defined. In the case of superiority, scholars sometimes allude to its theoretical ideas but fail to reference the term itself (or its vast history of scholarship). What is needed for both is a clearer definition of terms and usage of the most correct terms.

As I have established in Chapter 2, there are differences and overlaps between irony, parody, and satire. To be sure, incongruity is their common denominator, but all three can function in disparate ways. Olson and Olson, Morris, Gring-Pemble and Solomon Watson have made it their focus to define these terms while engaging in their analysis of humorous texts. And, perhaps more importantly, they have emphasized the disparate audience judgments of the satires and parodies (by theorizing about numerous audiences or "interpretive communities"). Other humor studies could benefit from interrogating the humor labels and acknowledging the importance of reception when deciding what type of humor a text represents. In turn, the community of humor scholars can benefit from having a more coherent and universal vocabulary set from which to work.

Superiority theory also plays an important, but largely unstated role in humor studies (meaning that the foundation of the theory is present in many studies, but authors do not specifically employ the term "superiority theory"). Superiority theory should have a more obvious presence in many essays, despite the risk of becoming "loser" or "too serious" academics. Scholars should work past incongruity and its brethren to provide more in-depth analysis of how incongruous humor can be interpreted and utilized for different symbolic ends. Avoiding use of the term superiority (or deprecation) theory seems like symbolic surrender to those scholars, critics, and audience members who

prefer not to take humor seriously. By facing critics head-on and using "serious" terms such as superiority or deprecation, scholars may chip away at the non-serious shield that envelopes and protects some humor (even humor that may be offensive and oppressive).

One way in which to use bold theories such as superiority and to still avoid being cast as the misunderstanding, too serious academic, is to support one's research with audience findings. In the next section, I will discuss how humor critics have given a nod to audience studies, acknowledging their importance, but seem unwilling, on the whole, to bring viewers/readers of their texts into the critical fold. The humor scholars I survey engage in what Stromer-Galley and Schiappa call "audience conjectures," which refers to advancing claims about the "effects" of texts without providing adequate audience-based support. Some humor scholars also engage in what I call the "construction of hypothetical interpretive communities," which means that they draw inferences about various audiences and their potentially disparate receptions of the text, again without consulting audience members.

AUDIENCE CONJECTURES AND HYPOTHETICAL INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

The audience plays a largely *theoretical* role in many of these pieces of humor criticism. Of the almost 40 articles I surveyed, only six report the findings of original qualitative or quantitative audience research (Cooks and Orbe; King; Novek; Park et al.; Rockler; Vidmar and Rokeach). Park et al., who utilize both textual and audience analysis, note that "a discussion of the ideological limitations and possibilities of racial stereotypes in comedy cannot be complete without exploring audience's interpretation of the text" (165). Hanke also highlights the importance of audience research because

viewers' identities and experiences necessarily frame the way that they interpret the text: "reception analysis is vital if we are to understand the sorts of investments and dispositions that male and female viewers bring to television texts, including comic ones" (90). Yet Hanke, and the vast majority of the researchers examined here, fail to consider the views of various audience members when constructing and supporting their arguments.

Instead of consulting viewers or readers of their texts, many of the humor critics offer their own theorizations about the text's persuasiveness on a mass audience and/or about the existence of various interpretive communities. These two types of inferential leaps (audience conjectures and hypothetical interpretive communities) represent weaknesses in the existing humor scholarship. Although they do not conduct audience studies, Foss and Foss, Palmer-Mehta, Shugart, and Smith and Voth engage in audience conjectures. For example, Smith and Voth craft the condescending argument that *Saturday Night Live's* parodies of the first presidential debates of 2000 influenced the election in George W. Bush's favor because, "the substantively ignorant public could effectively identify with him [Bush] better than Gore" (127). Without engaging in audience research or citing audience-based studies, Foss and Foss argue that Garrison Keillor's monologues position audience members as feminine spectators, and that the listening experience is more persuasive because it is associated with pleasure, interest, and humor (424). Shugart acknowledges that the audience "remains a vital component of humor," but does not study actual viewers (98). However, in the conclusion, Shugart advances claims about the ideological effects of the program on two theorized audiences: "For both audiences considered in this essay – the mainstream audience and the spectator

audience – the *Ellen* parodies function not only to subvert gender and sexualized femininity, but also to neutralize the male gaze" (109). In this passage, we see Shugart blend audience conjecture with hypotheses about two interpretive communities.

Just as Shugart is not alone in her audience conjectures, other scholars forward similar hypotheses about two or more interpretive communities. In her analysis of the *The Man Show*, Johnson posits three audiences who may derive pleasure from the show in different ways: 1. an audience that appreciates the bathroom humor of the program and ignores the celebration of chauvinism, 2. an audience that reads the chauvinism as ironic and not representative of the hosts' actual views, or 3. an audience that enjoys the non-ironic expression of blatant sexism (172-173). Johnson only explores the meanings associated with the third audience because she believes several textual features point viewers toward this reading of the program.

Olbrys ("Disciplining") similarly muses about disparate audience readings, yet argues that a *Saturday Night Live* sketch featuring the late comedian Chris Farley operates within the derisive grotesque frame instead of being a liberating moment of the carnivalesque due to textual and institutional features that suture the meaning of his comic text for viewers (249-251). Olbrys draws from a variety of rhetorical features in order to support his claim, including: the rhetoric of the camera, the narrative that is privileged by hearing one character's voiceover at the end of the sketch, the scene/setting of the sketch, the genre of late-night television humor in general, and the outcome of the sketch (Farley's body is explicitly deemed unacceptable by a panel of Chippendales male-revue judges). In this manner, Olbrys is attempting to read the audience's (hegemonic) interpretation from the textual features. While I do find his explanations and

support for his conclusion plausible, I think that his conclusion about the text is too tidy and limited in that he does not consider extra-textual features. Polysemic interpretations are not limited by the dominant textual features, but can instead be extrapolated from specific textual elements. Cultural studies work that examines participatory culture and fan communities provides an excellent example of how textual crumbs can be transformed by viewer creativity.

Creating what is arguably their own irony, Olson and Olson also theorize about the audience in their article titled "Beyond Strategy: A *Reader-Centered* Analysis of Irony's Dual Persuasive Uses" (emphasis added). The authors call for more nuance in approaches to readers' interpretations of irony, yet do not actually consult readers/viewers for "such evidence is rarely available and never comprehensive" (25). Instead of making their own evidence through focus groups, interviews, surveys, or other methods, Olson and Olson look to the "text for clues to the range of ways it might mean for readers with dissimilar symbolic interests" (25). To the authors' credit, their audience theorizing is more in-depth than the work of many others and they do discuss four separate "symbolic interests;" however, my concerns about these unsupported inferential leaps still persist.

Even those who theorize about interpretive communities often end up dismissing the alternative readings. Johnson, for example, posits three possible roads of interpretation for her text, *The Man Show*, yet she pursues only one critical pathway. Several others including Shugart, Hanke, and Park et al. also use the concluding sections of their essays to articulate what they perceive to be the most common or most rational interpretation, engaging in critical suturing of a text's meaning. Hanke offers that male

viewers of his mock-macho television programs may experience pleasure in the parodies of masculinity, thus questioning the social-constructedness of their own masculinity. However, he concludes that based on his interpretation of these programs as "light parody" this progressive outcome is unlikely (89).

Although their focus group participants were not offended by *Rush Hour 2's* racial jokes, Park et al. conclude that:

> the generic conventions and textual devices of comedy *ensure* that viewers actively consume and derive pleasure from racial jokes and stereotypes without critical and interrogative engagement with them. Comedy ultimately controls and limits audiences' critical reflection of potentially racist characterizations, thereby making viewers susceptible to the beliefs of racial difference. (173, emphasis added)

While this conclusion may be accurate, Park et al.'s definitive statement about the effects of their comedic text privileges their textual analysis over the focus group findings without adequate support about effects.

Theorizing about the audience may seem like a positive step toward acknowledging the importance of viewer meaning-making, but I believe it ultimately reifies the critic-centric model of examining humorous mediated texts for it makes it seem like the critic has exhausted the text's meanings and/or that the polysemy of the text is limited when it may actually be far more open than one scholar (or a few scholars) make it seem. And although critics may hypothesize about different interpretive communities, they often dismiss the multiplicity of interpretations in favor of the one that they find the most productive or believable. Instead of adding nuance and more solid support to their claims, many critics build unsubstantiated support with a straw man interpretive community.

So how does this textual and critic-centeredness limit our abilities to observe the given means of persuasion? The major problems I infer from this trend of failing to perform audience studies of humorous texts are 1. many alternative readings of a text may be ignored or missed, and 2. inferential leaps about effects are often made without substantial support.[2] These troubles can lead critics to go round in circles debating the merits of their disparate readings of the same text – what Stromer-Galley and Schiappa refer to as an "interpretive stalemate" (42). The "Jon Stewart Trial" provides a vivid illustration of the potentially stultifying critical tug-of-war that is created when the audience is ignored. After Hart and Hartelius condemn Jon Stewart and other (intentionally) comedic political pundits as "bullies who force us into one and only one [cynical] way of imagining the world" (269), Hariman responds that "the humorous techniques of the *Daily Show* are all in the service of a defense of democratic deliberation" (274). Same text, diametrically opposed conclusions – who's right?

Enter Bennett who adds something he claims that has been "hitherto lacking" in the proceedings: evidence (278). One need not be an experienced quantitative or qualitative researcher to supplement textual analysis with audience studies, as Bennett demonstrates by pulling his "audience evidence" from other scholars' published research. He states that "in addition to examining the context in which this alleged heretical comedy is being practiced, we must examine who consumes it and whether they are

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2 Once an unsubstantiated claim is published, other authors may draw from that claim in their own essays thereby perpetuating potential misinformation. For example, Cooper and Pease draw from Foss and Foss's unsubstantiated claim that humorous narratives are more persuasive than non-humorous narratives (see Cooper and Pease 301-302 and Foss and Foss 425). Although their claim may have merit, Foss and Foss offer no citations of media effects studies (their own or other scholars') as support.

indeed doomed to ignorance and self-satisfied dismissal of politics as a result" (278). Bennett cuts straight to the poites of this debate: Based on an audience study indicating that *Daily Show* viewers are more informed about politics than non-viewers, he concludes that cynical humor "does not deter responsible citizen engagement" (282). To be sure, there are other factors besides civic knowledge tests that gauge the efficacy of one's political participation, but the findings Bennett brings in represent an illuminating addition to the Stewart debate. Just as Bennett adds important information to the Stewart debate, so, too, can audience research enhance the scope of scholarly contributions regarding humorous texts and their persuasiveness.

(LARGELY) AMBIVALENT COLLECTIVE FINDINGS

Humorous texts are considered both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic (in almost equal measure) throughout the articles I surveyed. In some essays, the comic genre is described as a "safe" or "productive" space for depicting identities that challenge normative categories (see, for example, Battles and Hilton-Morrow 89; Foss and Foss 424; Freeman 400). Scholars' hypotheses about how these comedically protected, a-typical identities are interpreted by viewers are mixed. Cooper and Pease take the counter-hegemonic position, arguing that the "jarring incongruity" of tragic and comic narratives in an episode of *Ally McBeal* "work to indict bigotry and intolerance, and thus resist heternormative culture by exposing the inevitable limitations and consequences of the dominant discourses of heterosexual ideology" (301). However, as hegemony hunters Battles and Hilton-Morrow assert, the humorous context may signal to viewers that any role reversals should not be taken seriously (98). The authors thereby dismiss the

subversive potential of comic stretching of normative identities (at least that which occurs on *Will and Grace*). These disparate findings again exemplify that there was no clear link between incongruity as a lens through which to understand the humor, and the potential effects described by critics of incongruous or ironic texts.

It should be noted that other than the debate surrounding Jon Stewart and the *Daily Show* and three articles on *In Living Color* (Cooks and Orbe; Schulman "The House;" Schulman "Laughing"), none of the articles I surveyed address the same text. So when I refer to ambivalent findings or meanings, I do not mean intra-textually, but *among* the articles that critique *different* humorous texts. The lack of dialectical critical dialogue on the same humorous texts (aside from the *Daily Show* and *In Living Color*, for which there are both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic scholarly interpretations) may lead one to the potential conclusion that ambivalent humor criticism is not a "problem" at all for the reason for the ambiguous findings lies in the disparate nature of the humorous texts. I think, however, that the polarizing effect that the *Daily Show* has had on rhetorical and political communication scholars would not be unique if more scholars got together to compare their interpretations of humorous texts. Indeed, polysemic critical interpretations often emerge in more informal academic settings such as classrooms and conferences. Brockriede describes confrontation as the fifth tenet of his theory of rhetorical criticism as argument: a risk of confrontation with one's peers about one's claim or inferential leap (166). I believe that confrontation and debate can be a productive way to force ourselves (as critics) to build further support for our claims, viewing confrontation not as a positive outcome of rhetorical criticism but as a means to reach more enlightening conclusions.

Perhaps this critical dialectic is what it will take to push humor scholarship toward more audience research.

Many of the texts that were subjected to critical scrutiny in the articles I surveyed have similar features. The texts that are the most related to my dissertation subject (because they address humor premised on racial stereotypes) include comic strip "The Boondocks" (Rockler), the film *Rush Hour 2* (Park et al.), and television programs *In Living Color* (Cooks and Orbe; Schulman "The House;" Schulman "Laughing") and *All in the Family* (Vidmar and Rokeach). These articles, too, present a mixed bag of findings regarding the hegemonic or counter-hegemonic nature of the texts. Pitting these conclusions against one another forces scholars to more deeply question the textual features and the features of the rhetorical situation that may lead to such mixed outcomes.

These ambivalent findings about the effects of humorous texts can be seen even among articles that utilized original audience studies (again, these audience studies were for different texts). For example, Cooks and Orbe quantitatively and qualitative tested the theories of selective reception and selective perception in relation to *In Living Color,* concluding that the program's crude African American parodies are not a "tool for pro-social learning" because "parody is only effective when viewers have realistic depictions for comparisons" (231). Entering a different rhetorical situation, Novek analyzes an inmate-produced prison newspaper, concluding that ironic humor is employed for empowering ends that confirm the "authors' value as human beings" in the face of the institutional system (298). Although a popular culture text and a mediated text that is produced and consumed mostly within prison walls have different rhetorical constraints that limit their meanings, both employ humor that has the potential to be a progressive or

oppressive force in their consumptive communities. These diametrically opposed conclusions suggest that scholars should further explore the rhetorical situations and textual features that may lead to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic outcomes.

There are often exceptions to rules and as I mentioned earlier, the only correlation I could find between theory and conclusions about a text's effects (the only "unambivalent" findings) were with articles that utilized Kenneth Burke's comic frame. As explained in Chapter 2, Burke's comic frame is related to incongruity but connects incongruity to effects, positing that a social deviant can be induced to fall back into line with the existing social order through gentle prodding (which can include non-violent social movement strategies, mild humor, or other symbolic strategies) to point out the clown's mistakenness. Burke praises the comic frame as a well-rounded (*Attitudes* 28-29) and humane (*Attitudes* 42) strategy for altering orientations and effecting social change, so this theory prescribes a progressive view about the role of gentle, symbolic prodding (see Table 2.1 which notes that Burke's theories account for an "invited response" on behalf of the text's audience).

Indeed, the articles that utilized Burke's comic frame often, but not always, reveal counter-hegemonic conclusions (for exceptions, see Carlson "Limitations"). For example, Hariman draws on the comic frame to defend Jon Stewart for humorously presenting the common fallibility of the public and politicians, a humorous strategy that functions as a homeopathic antidote to political cynicism (275). In a similar work of praise for humor of a different medium, Shultz and Germeroth conclude that disabled cartoonist John Callahan's art transcends the "unresolvable prejudice of ableist people against persons with disabilities" by using perspective by incongruity and the comic frame (242-243). In

both examples, we see the comic frame being employed to support counter-hegemonic claims.

While Burke's theories of the comic frame and the burlesque frame have been employed toward productive critical ends, it is important to be cautious of using the theories as one's only support for claims about a text's persuasiveness. The frames have been criticized for several reasons including their lack of differentiation from one another. For example, Moore notes that it is challenging to discern where a frame of acceptance ends and rejection begins, describing burlesque as "comic rejection" (112; 109). The line between the happy stupidity of humor and heroic identification of the comic frame is blurry as well. It seems to depend on the outcome: Is the hero identified with (empowerment by identification)? Or not identified with (happy stupidity, which dwarfs the situation)? Also, if the status quo has been upheld and the deviate clown does not take his/her invitation to change their behavior and rejoin the social order, does the comic frame necessarily become just humor (see also Moore 108)? All three Burkean theories posit drastically different outcomes: progressive social change (albeit within the existing frames of social order), impotent emotional cathexis (relief) through caricaturing an enemy's behavior, and complacency (or happy stupidity) regarding the condition of one's life or society. Burke does not provide a broad enough survey of literary texts to describe the textual details (nor social conditions) that actually lead to these three responses. As in my criticisms of the construction of "figurative audiences," support is lacking for the Burkean claims of persuasiveness.

When contrasted with the Burkean prescribed persuasiveness, it is positive that humor scholarship that utilizes other theories results in ambivalent findings. There is not

yet a definitive equation one can plug textual details into in order to accurately predict the persuasive outcome a text will have on an audience (or on various interpretive communities). While the definitive persuasion equation is a simplified, positivistic method of looking at the effectivity of humorous texts, I believe that audience research can add important pieces to the critical puzzle and potentially reduce the ambivalent findings of humor criticism.

CONCLUSIONS

Three themes emerged in my survey of almost 40 articles of humor scholarship (analyzing only humorous mediated texts) in communication journals: theoretical lenses are not clearly defined, authors make many conjectures about persuasion and hypothesize about audiences, and there are mostly ambivalent collective findings about the impact of various humorous texts on society. Each of these limitations that I've described in existing scholarship can be improved upon separately, but I believe that the issue underlying them all is that humorous texts are not treated as their own category or genre of analysis. To be sure, many of the humorous texts can also be considered part of popular culture, but they are their own unique subset of popular culture: The discursive incongruities at the heart of much humor make them more polysemic than other types of popular texts. As such, they require a special kind of treatment by those who study the texts and their persuasiveness. This special treatment should involve careful attention to and use of humor theory, and it should involve audience research in order to have a better understanding of the potential hegemonic and counter-hegemonic functions of the texts.

Textual analysis has been, and should always be, a necessary component of humor criticism. Critics can indeed offer insightful arguments about how a text should be interpreted. Critics can also use textual analyses to advance various theories about humor. For example, Morris undertakes the fascinating mission to understand "when good humor becomes bad taste" in his case study of the offensive humor column by John Bloom titled "We are the Weird" (arguably a parody of the 1980s collaborative charity song "We are the World") (460-461). Morris does not argue about how the text is received – it had already been vocally condemned by some newspaper editors and readers; instead, he attempts to understand the textual features that led to the text's condemnation. Many humor scholars in the communication field, however, do not undertake theoretical work: Most are interested in how the texts may shape social relations (or at least they address these issues in their conclusions). In order to strengthen these types of arguments, we need to build on textual analysis with audience analysis. This research will help advance humor scholarship into new areas and create a broader understanding of humorous texts as their own site of meaning.

In their article on audience conjectures, Stromer-Galley and Schiappa praise Jhally and Lewis' audience research in their book *Enlightened Racism* for it "advances and refines the debate" about the potential positive and negative features of *The Cosby Show* "in a way that critics making audience conjectures without audience research could not" (42). I agree that the particular type(s) of support used should complement an author's claims. And, although Jhally and Lewis' work is a book-length, very in-depth study, adding more "evidence" need not lead to unrealistic expectations of the skills and time scholars need to gather support for their claims or the space needed in journals to

report textual and audience "evidence." Take, for example, Park et al.'s study of *Rush Hour 2* that combines textual analysis and viewer focus groups: a rhetorical scholar need not undertake specialized training to conduct and analyze focus group data (interviews yield textual data that can be rhetorically analyzed), it does not take a long time to collect the information (although one must navigate the sometimes complex channels of their Institutional Review Board), and the findings of such analyses can be reported within the standard space of a journal article (Park et al.'s article is 21 pages).

In sum, complementary textual and audience analysis of humorous texts has the potential to bring new and exciting epistemic advances to the study of humorous mediated discourse and to be ultimately productive for the communication discipline, but it is also practical within researcher and publication constraints. In the next section of this dissertation, I will model a tripartite method of understanding a humorous text and its social implications. Not every study of a humorous text needs to involve qualitative measures of viewer responses to a text, unconscious and conscious qualitative measures of prejudice, and analyses of the textual features that may lead to polysemic interpretations, but hopefully other scholars will be interested in the unique information revealed by each method of analysis and be encouraged to use an additional method or two in their own explorations of humorous texts.

PART II: *UNDERSTANDING STEREOTYPE-BASED HUMOR*

Chapter 4: *Rhetorical Criticism of* Chappelle's Show

This chapter presents a textual analysis of race-based stereotypes in *Chappelle's Show* in order to begin crafting an understanding of the following research question: What textual features may inform viewers' decodings of various meanings from stereotype-based humorous texts? This chapter is not meant to stand alone in that it draws definitive conclusions about the meanings of the text, but is intended to be a starting point for mining the potential meanings that may be drawn from the text. This chapter represents the first step toward what will be a reflexive dialogue between the textual analysis and audience studies.

In order to immerse myself in the text, I viewed the DVDs of all seasons, including the unfinished "Lost Episodes" of season three, and took careful notes on the dialogue and other verbal and visual semiotic elements of the sketches, paying particular attention to the humor and jokes that pertained to issues of race and racism. While the program does incorporate many other stereotypes, including those related to gender and sexual orientation, the focus of this project is on racial stereotypes and that is what this rhetorical analysis highlights. Even focusing on this specific type of humor, *Chappelle's Show* presents an abundance of material for analysis. The program is notorious for its racial humor: In an article in *TV Guide,* Fretts states that *Chappelle's Show* takes a "riotously blunt look at race in America" (26). This chapter will now take a not so riotously blunt look at that race-based humor, first discussing theories on how viewers

make meanings with mediated discourse that addresses issues of race and racism, and then moving on to the analysis of individual *Chappelle's Show* sketches.

DECODING RACE-BASED HUMOR

In order to understand the subversive or oppressive characteristics of race-based humor on *Chappelle's Show*, the theory of "ambivalence" provides a productive framework. Ambivalence has been developed as a theory for understanding both humor and mediated representations of race, thus it makes a fitting lens for critiquing humorous mediated representations of race. For example, in describing carnivalesque humor, Bakhtin notes, "this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (11-12). Similarly, in his book *The Semantic Mechanisms of Humor,* linguist Viktor Raskin asserts that ambiguity underlies "much, if not all, of verbal humor" (xiii). The terms ambiguity and ambivalence allude to the discursive incongruities at the heart of much humor. Because of these ambivalent, discursive incongruities, humor requires an audience to position, to interpret or make sense of the discursive clashes. In sum, ambivalence accounts for the discursive incongruities underlying much humor and its resulting polysemic qualities.

With regard to racial representation, Herman Gray uses the term "ambivalence" to describe a binary system of interpretation of racist stereotypes, particularly those that are intended to be parodies of stereotypes (Gray 130-132; see also Cloud 314; Haggins 173). Gray uses ambivalence to inform his analysis of *In Living Color,* the sketch-comedy project of Keenan Ivory Wayans, which aired on FOX in the early 1990s and is perhaps the closest generic precursor to *Chappelle's Show.* He explains that even though many of

the show's characters represent historic stereotypes "through parody and satire, the very presence of these characters (as well as the multiracial cast) set in African American contexts constantly forces viewers to jockey for a 'reading position'" (Gray 131). In other words, Gray questions whether *In Living Color's* stereotypical characters are perceived as a satire working to uproot bigotry or if viewers, particularly highly prejudiced viewers, miss the satirical quality and interpret the stereotypes as realistic, thus leading to an internalization of negative stereotypes (see also Cooks and Orbe 231; Schulman "Laughing Across" 6).

The work of Gray and others in explicating the meanings of *In Living Color* can be useful when considering how to interpret the messages embedded in *Chappelle's Show* because of the two programs' generic similarities. Gray explains the dichotomous nature of the program's use of stereotypes:

> [*In Living Color*] is sometimes ambivalent about its representation of black difference even as it critiques White racism; it is ambivalent about gayness in the black community even when it satirizes effeminate black gay men; and it is ambivalent about black women as it reverses the terms of power in and of gender relations. (131)

Gray concludes that the ambiguous nature of racial representation in the sketch comedy *In Living Color* can have disparate effects on prejudice: "For some, this ambivalence contests hegemonic assumptions and representations of race in general and blacks in particular in the American social order; for others, it simply perpetuates troubling images of blacks" (131). Summarizing Gray's articulation of ambivalence, the term can be used to refer not only to the textual representation of racial stereotypes through parody and satire, but also to the corresponding hegemonic or counter-hegemonic effects such portrayals may have on viewers.

The theory of ambivalence describes constraints regarding the openness of a humorous text – there is not unlimited meaning that the audience may draw from the text, but these meanings can be diametrically opposed, working to maintain or subvert hegemonic assumptions. The theory of ambivalence provides a more suitable understanding of stereotype-driven humor than other theories on polysemy such as Celeste Condit's idea of polyvalence. Condit argues that there is one dominant meaning created by the rhetorical constraints on a text (103). Viewers, according to Condit, cannot resist the dominant meaning of a text, they can only disagree with the value of the meaning (106). In ambivalence, contradictory meanings (not just disagreements with the value of a meaning) are possible and probable due to the incongruous nature of humorous discourses and the importance of viewer interpretations. Viewers likely do not need to disagree with the value of a meaning because humorous discourse provides a more open rhetorical space for viewers to evade cognitive dissonance and avoid confronting or challenging their existing values. To use the example of racial stereotypes in a comic context, viewers who actually harbor those stereotypes can interpret them as representations of reality and viewers who do not harbor the stereotypes can interpret the program as a critique of the stereotypes or those who hold them.

Questions surrounding the effects of ambivalent portrayals of race and racism on viewers are also the root concern of many qualitative and quantitative studies that utilize the theory of selective perception (see Vidmar and Rokeach 42; Cooks and Orbe "Beyond the Satire" 255). The theory of selective perception posits that viewers may interpret the television discourse in counter-hegemonic or hegemonic ways, depending upon what is consistent with their preexisting viewpoints. For example, in their seminal

study of the sitcom *All in the Family,* Vidmar and Rokeach found that viewers who had higher levels of prejudice admired bigoted protagonist Archie Bunker and condoned his use of racial slurs whereas lower prejudiced individuals were more likely to admire Archie's liberal son-in-law, Mike. A study commissioned by the CBS network on *All in the Family* (cited in Bogle *Primetime* 186), and one conducted by Cooks and Orbe on the FOX sketch comedy program *In Living Color* (225), yielded similar results: The supposed satires reinforced preexisting racial prejudices. The findings of these and other studies support the theory that irony, parody, and satire are audience-constructed, indicating that those building blocks of humor are necessarily unstable in their meanings, particularly when the ironic, parodic, or satiric meaning contradicts viewers ideologies or beliefs.

My three part case study looks to add more nuance to the theory of ambivalence. Some questions remain unanswered in the previous works on ambivalence and selective perception, including: What textual features direct viewers toward particular meanings? What factors other than high or low prejudice influence the way viewers make sense of ambivalent texts premised on racial stereotypes? Can racial stereotype-based humorous texts have an impact or influence on viewers' prejudices? Although I can not definitively answer these questions based on my exploration of one text, the combination of my textual and audience analyses (Chapters 4-6) should help lead to additional findings and greater understanding of the processes by which polysemic meanings are negotiated between texts and viewers.

Hegemonic Interpretations

Ambivalence and the selective perception of *Chappelle's Show* are important to consider given the negativity of African American stereotypes that are utilized in the show. My analysis of the program revealed that African Americans are commonly portrayed as violent, drug using, and irresponsible. Even though these portrayals may be intended to be ironic, parodic, or satiric, and may of course be read this way, there are likely many viewers who take the portrayals at face value. These stereotypes about African Americans who are violent and drug-using are particularly troubling from a critical perspective because they can be seen as part of a long historical trajectory of discriminatory media portrayals spanning from *Birth of a Nation,* to blaxploitation films, to present day segregation in law programs (see Bogle *Toms*; Hall "Whites"; Henry). Robin Means Coleman claims that the violent stereotype is still alive and well in modern-day programming. In her 2000 analysis of television situation comedies and dramas, Coleman states that African Americans are often "limited to portrayals of pimps, drug dealers, gun-toting gang members, rapists, or murderers" (9).

There are several "stock characters" who make appearances throughout various sketches and exemplify some of these negative stereotypes historically seen in mediated portrayals of African Americans. These characters include Tron, a drug dealer, and Tyrone Biggums, a crack addict who engages in many unseemly behaviors for money or drugs. Such character traits appear even in sketches that do not seem to be primarily about racial stereotypes. For example, in a sketch that derives inspiration from *A Christmas Carol,* Chappelle plays a magical character who shows a large-breasted woman what her life would be like if she were more moderately endowed. After the

woman learns to appreciate her large breasts (for without them she would not have been promoted and would not be included in her friend's bridal party) and returns to reality, she has the following exchange with Chappelle's character:

> Woman: Thanks Mister. You must be an angel or something.
>
> Chappelle: Angel, I ain't no angel. I'm a janitor.
>
> Woman: Then how did you show me all those places?
>
> Chappelle: Girl, I am high on PCP. I was gonna ask you how you was following me. (I, 3)

In this sketch that is presumably not about drug use, viewers are left with the end message that this supposed angel is really a drug-using janitor. Because the man's drug use and other negative African American stereotypes are not the main focus of the sketch, it is difficult to find textual details that support an ironic or satiric reading of the character's negative attributes. The drug use and janitorial occupation seem like an aside, or a taken-for-granted, standard supporting character, thereby limiting interrogation of the stereotype.

Counter-Hegemonic Interpretations

On the opposite side, Schulman argues that African American comedy evokes "common racist, sexist, and ethnocentric stereotypes" that ultimately generate a "comic catharsis" by revealing the absurdity of racial prejudice ("The House" 109). Schulman bases her argument on Chen's theory of "minor discourse," which seeks to deterritorialize the landscape of mass media analysis in order to celebrate the unique discursive practices of non-dominant (or minority) groups (see Chen 47-48). Two of the

key features that make stand-up comedy a potentially subversive form of minor discourse are 1. the exaggeration of stereotypes, thereby marking it as a satire for some viewers or audience members and 2. the minority ownership of the humor.

Others, including Boskin and Dorinson have advanced similar claims that comedy can uproot discriminatory ideologies: According to the authors, derisive stereotypes were "adopted by their targets in mocking self-description, and then, triumphantly, adapted by the victims of stereotyping themselves as a means of revenge against their more powerful detractors" (97-98). The authors opine that the reversal of stereotypes has been a common form of rebellion by Jews and African Americans throughout history (Boskin and Dorinson 109). In their discourse analysis of racist remarks, Barnes, Palmary, and Durrheim argue that humor may challenge discrimination by not only expressing contempt for the stereotypes, but also contempt for people who believe them (327). Successful television and film producer Keenen Ivory Wayans defended his series *In Living Color* in a similar vein, stating, "If I take something and ridicule it to such a degree that people could never look at it as anything real, then it really helps to destroy a preconceived notion" (quoted in Bogle *Primetime* 379).

Interestingly, Chappelle offers this excuse for his use of egregious stereotypes as he primes the audience for another sketch on racial differences:

> You know folks it's been an interesting couple of weeks here at *Chappelle's Show*. A lot of flack I've been getting for the racially charged sketches. It happens. But I think I'm being misunderstood so I just wanted to take a moment to explain myself. I'm not advocating in any way shape or form any kind of racial hatred. I'm just making fun of each other's cultures. It's fun. The problem is when you do stereotypical kind of jokes, there's no room for subtlety. (II 3)

This monologue may further encourage *Chappelle's Show* viewers to interpret the stereotypes a humorous *exaggeration*, thereby positioning the humor as a counter-hegemonic force.

With regard to minority ownership over the humor, Schulman explains that *In Living Color* is marked as a space of minor discourse by its rap theme song, racially diverse cast, and the visible presence of its African American producer and other minority members of its production team ("Laughing Across" 2-3). These features give the sense that racial minorities have power in the show's production and control over its message, thereby encouraging viewers to see the show's humor as representative of the African American in-group. Freud, too, indicates that the source of racial or ethnic humor is very important when considering the consequences of the discourse. He explains,

> The jokes made about Jews by foreigners are for the most part brutal comic stories in which a joke is made unnecessary by the fact that Jews are regarded by foreigners as comic figures. The Jewish jokes which originate from Jews admit this too; but they know their real faults as well as the connection between them and their good qualities . . . . (*Jokes* 110)

If the audience identifies with the target of a racial or ethnic joke, in order to be amused by the discourse, they must perceive that the joke teller does not intend to insult or perpetuate stereotypes about them. Otherwise, thoughts of the potentially negative consequences of the "humor" may inhibit the positive feelings that are necessary for audience amusement.

While the production team of *Chappelle's Show* is racially diverse, several features mark this as an African American space, one that can be seen as a producer of minor discourse. First and foremost, Dave Chappelle is the star of the eponymous show and is also listed as one of two writers and one of three producers. Second, there are

several other African American actors with recurring roles, most notably Donnell Rawlings and Charlie Murphy who took over as hosts for the final episodes following Chappelle's departure from the show. Social critic, actor, and rapper Mos Def also appears several times and gives several musical performances to close the show. Furthermore, many famous African American entertainers including Erykah Badu, Big Boi of OutKast, RZA and GZA of the Wu-Tang Klan, Wayne Brady, Snoop Dog, and Rick James have made notable guest appearances on the program. Collectively, the African American presence in the production of *Chappelle's Show* makes it a fitting producer of minor discourse, for the humor seems to originate from an African American in-group and is potentially more subversive of prejudice compared to humor that is about African Americans but is not created or controlled by them.

ANALYSIS

The forthcoming analysis will not adopt one dominant position regarding the political and ideological nature of *Chappelle's Show*, but will instead present my ambivalent interpretations of the text by discussing both oppressive and transgressive features of the racial humor. It is beyond the limits of this chapter to critique all of the sketches that address issues of race and racism. Instead I have chosen 12 sketches that are representative of the program and best illustrate the issues of ambiguity in the program's use of race-based humor. Eight of these sketches are included in "The Best of

Chappelle's Show" DVD[3] and many were mentioned as favorites by the focus group participants I interviewed.

Within the analysis of each sketch, I will describe the scene, discuss the textual features that may be situated within hegemonic discursive structures, and also address the ways in which hegemonic discourses may be disrupted or counter-hegemonic readings may be privileged. The sketches are discussed in chronological fashion and cited in a season, episode format. Some sketches are named on the program, but those that are unnamed are given my own descriptive titles.

Clayton Bigsby: Blind White Supremacist

The story of Clayton Bigsby, the Black and blind White supremacist is one of the most infamous sketches from *Chappelle's Show*. In his introduction to this sketch, which aired in the show's very first episode, Chappelle announces,

> I still haven't been cancelled yet, but I'm working on it and I think this next piece might be the one to do it. This is probably the wildest thing I've ever done in my career. And I showed it to a Black friend of mine – he looked at me like I had set people back with a comedy sketch. I'm sorry. Let's roll it. (I, 1)

The studio audience seems to delight in Chappelle's dismissal of being criticized for setting Black people back with a comedy sketch. His shrug of the shoulders and insincere

[3] "The Best of *Chappelle's Show*" DVD was released in June 2007. It includes the sketches, "Clayton Bigsby: Blind White Supremacist," "Tyrone's Anti-Drug Speech," "Roots," "Reparations," "America United," "Roca-Pads," "Mad Real World," "Wu-Tang Financial," "Tyrone's Intervention," "America Undercover: Player Haters Ball," "R. Kelly: I'm Gonna Piss On You," "Trading Spouses," "Samuel Jackson Beer," "Racial Draft," "The Niggar Family," "Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories: Prince," "Lil' Jon at the Airport," "Keeping It Real (Office)," "Oprah is Pregnant," "Dave in Jury Selection," "Making The Band 2," "A Night With Wayne Brady," "Black Bush," "New Tupac Song," and "Dave Meets Showbiz."

"I'm sorry" perhaps signal to viewers that he doesn't find the sketch to be oppressive and that they shouldn't either.

This sketch takes the format of the PBS news program *Frontline,* and depicts the first public interview of Black and blind Ku Klux Klan leader, Clayton Bigsby (played by Chappelle). As the backstory explains, Bigsby grew up in the Wexler Home of the Blind. He was the only non-White student the home ever had so Bigsby was told he was White in order to "make it easier on [him]," according to headmistress Bridgett Wexler (I, 1). As the story proceeds, Bigsby expresses his hatred for non-Whites, but he eventually learns of his true racial identity after removing his hood at a KKK rally.

Throughout the sketch, Bigsby spouts off many racist stereotypes, potentially desensitizing viewers to the N word and other racial epithets, and giving them a false sense that these words or phrases are funny or acceptable. Interestingly, there is only weak or moderate audience laughter when the N word is used without being part of a broader joke. The studio audience laughter may present a window into how the studio audience responds to the sketch (although laughter is not the only indication of amusement), but perhaps more importantly, it presents a textual cue to the home viewing audience that the discourse is humorous. There is no hearty laughter at the titles of the racist books Bigsby authored, nor when the reporter says n----- at the start of the sketch (warning the audience that the story involves "gratuitous use of the N word" and then clarifying "by N word, I mean n-----"). However, when the word is situated within broader humor that critiques its potentially shifting meaning, there are more cues to take the jokes in a light-hearted manner. For example, at-home viewers hear loud studio audience laughter when Bisgby calls a car full of White teenagers n-----s after hearing

their loud rap music. The White teens respond, "did he just call us n-----s? Awesome!" This joke may encourage viewers to think that there are changing, less negative connotations associated with the N word, that it may be used as praise or as acceptable joke fodder. Chappelle reports later in season two that White people came up to him and freely repeated the N word when expressing their enthusiasm for the Bigsby sketch – much to his dismay (*Chappelle's Show Season Two* DVD). While the meaning of a word always has the potential to change, the N word is still associated with hatred and offensiveness when used in various contexts. Unfortunately this sketch may encourage viewers to ignore its historical and lingering hurtfulness.

Bigsby also espouses many racist stereotypes and epithets. After being asked why he doesn't like African Americans, Bigsby responds, "first of all they're lazy good for nothing tricksters, crack smoking swindlers, big butt having, wide nose breathing all the White man's air, they eat up all the chicken, they think they're the best dancers and they stink" (I, 1). Bigsby's emphasis on the word "stink" seems to draw the most studio audience laughter, potentially signaling that it is the capstone of his ridiculous tirade. After Bigsby's racial identity is revealed, *Frontline* reporter Kent Wallace ends the segment saying, "We're told that in the last few weeks [Bigsby] has accepted that he is a Black man. And three days ago he filed for divorce from his wife. When we asked why after 19 years of marriage. He responded, 'because she's a n----- lover'" (I, 1). Ending the segment this way may potentially reinforce a message of racial hatred; however, when situated within the broader scope of the sketch's discourse, this may be seen as yet another ridiculous satire of racism.

It is entirely possible that viewers may read the sketch as a counter-hegemonic satire of racism. The studio audience seems to respond with the most laughter to jokes that involve *both* incongruities and deprecation – not those that are premised only on hatred. For example, there is no loud laughter at the racist titles of Bigsby's White supremacist books, nor is there loud laughter with Bigsby's tirade about Asian Americans, homosexuals, and African Americans at the KKK rally. In contrast, the home audience is privy to a more raucous studio audience response with the incongruous revelation that Bigsby is a Black White supremacist, when the rap-loving White teenagers rejoice after being called n------, and when Bigsby learns the truth about his identity, but still divorces his wife for being a "n----- lover." Bigsby spews vituperative remarks toward a group of people who share his racial identity (and also at White teenagers). He "blindly" draws judgments about people's character based on their choice of music or the race of their spouse. Collectively, these discursive incongruities may be read as a satire, potentially highlighting the ridiculous premises of discrimination and discriminatory ideologies.

The possibilities also exist for interpreting the sketch counter-hegemonically because it is specifically White racists (or people who think they are White), and not just any group of discriminatory people who may be taken as the target of the joke. Many of the White people in the sketch are racist and ignorant. Attendees at the KKK rally are clad in stereotypical "red neck" garb including flannel shirts and camouflage. Bigsby reinforces the "red neck" stereotype about incest when he states "My friend Jasper told me one of them coons came by his house to pick his sister up for a date. He said 'lookee

here n-----, that there's my girl. If anyone has sex with my sister it's going to be me.'" This remark draws a hearty, audible response from the studio audience.

The premise of the sketch is of course outrageous and the expressions of hatred toward minorities seem exaggerated and ridiculous (i.e. "big nose breathing all the White man's air"). *Frontline* correspondent Kent Wallace even highlights the incongruities, remarking that he is "overwhelmed by the irony." Even with many textual clues pointing viewers toward an ironic and satiric reading, the sketch may still function hegemonically for some viewers in that it encourages expressions of prejudice. As Chappelle himself experienced, the sketch's frequent use of racial epithets may desensitize non-African American viewers to the hurtfulness and negativity of such statements.

Reparations 2003

While the racist White characters in the previous sketch are fictitious, viewers get to see "real" White people who are angry about what they perceive to be "reverse racism" in the introduction to the "Reparations 2003" sketch. Chappelle begins by showing his appearance on an episode of *The Donohue Show* dedicated to affirmative action. A White audience member of *The Donohue Show* stated that he was against affirmative action because, "One of the underlying issues here is affirmative action forces somebody, you're forcing people. And anytime you force somebody, I don't know about you gentleman, but I don't like to be forced" (I, 4). Chappelle mocks the man's argument, saying to the *Chappelle's Show* audience,

> Forced? Oh you mean like slavery forced? Remember that thing where you forced us to work? What did you think Black people was like 'no problem boss, I'd love to!' Man that was infuriating! Not only am I for affirmative action, I will take it a

> step further – I want my reparations for slavery. That's right. I'm trying to get paid for the work of my forefathers. Done and done. The only thing I would say is if we do ever get our reparations, which I doubt, but if we do we Black people got to get together to come up with a plan for the money. This is a consumer based economy. You can't just give Black people all this money and turn them loose on the streets. That could be a potential disaster. (I, 4)

In this introduction to the sketch, we see Chappelle operate within a continuum of serious and non-serious personae, shifting from the former to the latter as he gets closer to revealing the sketch. He seems genuinely displeased with his appearance on *The Donohue Show,* signified by his downcast eyes and solemn speaking voice when describing what happened. Chappelle also brings that seriousness into his rebuttal, "oh you mean like slavery forced" and does seem infuriated by the dialogue of the guests on the show. Directly after he expresses his disgust and makes a call for reparations (which is greeted with studio audience applause), Chappelle shifts to a more comedic tone saying "I'm trying to get paid for the work of my forefathers" with a higher pitched, louder voice that he often uses when playing characters in sketches. The tone is decidedly less serious at that point, getting away from the notable issue of slavery reparations and moving on toward a preview of the humorous sketch that is to follow. If the sketch is to be read counter-hegemonically as a satire of African American stereotypes or of anti-reparations arguments, it is important for viewers to catch the serious to non-serious shift in Chappelle's tone, to divorce the representations in the sketch from the serious context of racial material inequalities and reparations.

"Reparations 2003" presents a vision of the post-reparations United States that highlights changes in the demand for goods and in employment patterns. Several features of this sketch make it seem like anti-reparations propaganda if the stereotypes (or at least

some of them) are taken at face value. This vision of material compensation, instead of rectifying some of the structural inequalities that plague African Americans, makes it seem that reparations will only enable the purchase superficial consumer goods. For example, the sketch opens up with a White reporter interviewing several African Americans who are part of a long line at a liquor store and another man who has bought a truckload of cigarettes with his reparations check. These scenes are indicative of the general superficial consumptive trend following reparations – a reporter on Wall Street reveals that gold and diamond stocks have gone up, 8,000 record labels were started, and three million Cadillac Escalades were sold.

Some of the more hard-hitting, stereotypical jokes were also made at the expense of Mexican Americans and Whites. White newscaster Chuck Taylor (Chappelle dressed in "Whiteface") functions as a metonym for the White establishment that perpetuates hegemony in the media industry. Taylor utilizes cheesy phrases such as "hot damn," over-enunciates his words, espouses racist views, and is thus set up as an acceptable target of insults. One of Taylor's most egregious lines comes when he is "accidentally" caught on camera saying "the crime rate has fallen to zero percent. How could that be, did the Mexicans get money today, too?" As Wicker at al. have observed, disparaging humor is rated as more funny when the object of the humor is a high status person or one who is disliked (707-708). After Taylor makes these remarks, he is insulted by "Portly Al" (an Al Roker parody) who calls him a "pasty bitch" and by Tron, an African American with a "hot hand in the dice game" (and currently the richest man in America) who says "suck my…" to Taylor just before the news feed cuts out. Both sets of insults draw much laughter from the studio audience. By "sharing the wealth" of deprecating

humor, and not only utilizing African American stereotypes in the sketch but also taking Whites and White privilege as the target of jokes, "Reparations 2003" incorporates hegemonic and counter-hegemonic elements. Whether the disparate discourses resonate equally with viewers is another issue.

Interestingly, there was a lack of laughter at some of the more serious social commentary in the sketch. When a White reporter observes, "these people just seem to be breaking their necks to give the money right back to us" ("these people" presumably referring to African Americans and "us" presumably referring to Whites), the racial stratification in the United States' economy is a taken-for-granted premise. Based on the inaudible studio-audience reaction, this comment did not register high on the humor scale. Also, when a White news correspondent announces matter-of-factly that there are no banks in the "ghetto" because "banks hate Black people," the discrimination in society is again put on full display, yielding little laughter. These moments of bald-faced commentary on economic discrimination potentially demarcate the lines between the serious and the non-serious in this sketch, leading to several questions: Is "humor" that "gets too serious" necessarily less amusing than non serious forms of humor? Does serious commentary about racism signal to viewers that the stereotypical jokes are by contrast satirical, not realistic?

I think that the possibilities of counter-hegemonic readings of the sketch are enhanced by the fact that Chappelle brackets the sketch with seemingly serious social commentary. In the introduction to the sketch, Chappelle points out that the arguments for affirmative action and reparations rest on the decades of unpaid work done by the forefathers of contemporary African Americans. At the end of the sketch, he interviews

people in his immediate studio audience about their opinions: An older African American woman states that she is in favor of reparations, while a man seated near her alludes to the failed promises of Reconstruction stating that he wants land. One cannot be sure if the serious dialogue buttressing the sketch and the serious discourse interspersed within the stereotypical humor are enough to push for a satirical reading of the images of liquor store lines, egregious consumption of material goods, dice games, and African American characters' laughter at reinvesting the money into the community, but there do appear to be some subversive elements to the glimpse into "Reparations 2003."

Ask a Black Dude

"Ask a Black Dude" is a repeated feature on *Chappelle's Show.* It stars comedian Paul Mooney who answers the questions of people on the street regarding African American culture and stereotypes. Chappelle introduces the first installment as follows:

> I know a lot of you White people at home might have had a feeling like you have questions for your Black friends that you want to ask them but you're afraid to ask. You don't want to alienate yourself or maybe get beat the fuck up. Well, I want to promote conversation and dialogue so I went on the streets and gave people the opportunity to ask all the questions that made them so curious. (I, 5)

Appearing in episodes five, seven, and ten of the first season of *Chappelle's Show,* Mooney answers questions about Black men's penis sizes and ability to jump, Black people's affinity for marijuana, why Black men commonly shave their heads, and why Black characters are often the first to die in films.

The common African American stereotypes of drug use and criminal behavior are again repeated in "Ask a Black Dude." For example, when responding to the question "can Black guys jump high?" Mooney replies, "Yeah Black people can jump high.

You've got to jump. You've got to do something when you're running from the police" (I, 5). This statement can of course be interpreted in ambivalent ways. Some viewers may read Mooney's statement as affirmation of a stereotype about African Americans and crime. On the other hand, it may be seen as a critique of law enforcement that disproportionately targets African Americans. Another comment that can be read hegemonically is Mooney's response to a question from a Black man about why Black people like to smoke so much weed. Mooney answers that, "Black people just like to party. They have that in their blood. Sometimes people can go overboard and it's real sad. And don't ask me about drugs – ask Whitney [Houston] and Bobbi [Brown]" (I, 5). This answer can also potentially reaffirm the stereotype of African American drug use, particularly with the reference to Houston and Brown's well-publicized addictions.

And, interestingly, in these previous questions and answers, much laughter is heard from the studio audience when Mooney's comedic responses resonate with African American stereotypes. For example, the studio audience responds with much laughter when Mooney comments about running from the police. When he seems genuinely saddened by drug use in the Black community, not a peep is heard – until Mooney caps it off by playing the one-sided dozens on infamous targets Houston and Brown.

In the latter episodes of "Ask a Black Dude," the questions and answers have perhaps greater potential to expose racist practices. Mooney is very passionate about the subject of African Americans in film, echoing a trend seen in another sketch entitled "Mooney on Movies" in which he criticizes *Gone with the Wind* and the segregationist policies that kept actress Hattie McDaniel from attending the premier of the movie (II, 7). When asked "why in movies is the Black guy the first guy killed," Mooney criticizes

Stephen King's book and film *The Green Mile* in which a magical African American heals White people and is then killed in the end. This leads Mooney to a discussion about Hollywood's focus on attracting White viewers and disregard for African American viewers:

> Black people are always worried . . . like in *Barbershop,* they're really worried about what they say in White films. White films go all over the world. Cause I remember *The Godfather* and I won't forget when they had the drug scene and they said well we won't do that – sell it to the n-----s. They should've had something to say about that. (I, 7)

Mooney then fields a question from Stephen King and offers that he has a few scripts for King: "N----- with a Brain" and "N-----s in School," suggesting that highlighting African American intelligence would be scary to White viewers. These segments potentially subvert discrimination with Mooney's critiques of Hollywood racism and discussion of the White bias in many films. Again, however, the studio audience does not shower Mooney's response with audible laughter as he discusses Hollywood racism. The areas that draw the most laughter are his insults toward Stephen King and his question "is the camera still on" (presumably making Mooney the butt of that joke) after his jeremiad about racism in *The Green Mile* and *The Godfather.*

A second set of potentially counter-hegemonic vignettes addresses White people copying African Americans' style. After being asked about the style with which Black men walk, Mooney explains "Black people walk like that because we've got style, we have flavor, we've got rhythm. I mean the Black man in America is the most copied man on this planet bar none. Everybody want to be a n----- but nobody want to be a n-----" (I, 5). Mooney utilizes the same cultural pirating argument in his response to a question about why Black men shave their heads:

> White folks wear bald heads, too. You know they ain't gonna let a n----- have nothing . . . . Oh they'll take stuff. They will take they won't let us have too much fun. That's what I told some Black people the other night at my show, I said don't get too fond of me 'cause White people will come in and take me. (I, 10)

Chappelle adds continuity to this line of thought when two White men come on stage at the end of this episode and take him away. Collectively these two potentially counter-hegemonic themes in "Ask a Black Dude" offer a critique of racism in Hollywood and in media portrayals, also exposing White appropriation of aspects of African American culture.

The Mad Real World

Three focus groups mentioned "The Mad Real World," a spoof on the race relations on MTV's reality program *The Real World,* as one of the most memorable sketches on the program. Race has often turned into a contentious battle ground for many of the "seven strangers picked to live in a house and have their lives taped" on *The Real World.* African American David Edwards was even kicked off of *The Real World Los Angeles* because his female housemates claimed to feel unsafe around him. According to Chappelle's commentary that accompanies the DVD, Edwards' story serves as the inspiration for this sketch (*Chappelle's Show Season One* DVD). "The Mad Real World" builds on the racial conflict of *The Real World,* attempting to turn the tables and create a house in which a lone White man lives with "six of the craziest Black people" (I, 6). "The Mad Real World" is one of the most fitting sketches to illustrate ambivalence as it seems to be intended as a parody of egregious racial stereotypes, but spends much time depicting African American stereotypes of drug use, violence, and irresponsibility.

The sketch opens with a view of the six African American members of the house playing dice and cards, smoking marijuana, and fighting. Viewers are privy to various exploits including the roommates' struggles at their job running a juice bar. Chad, the White roommate, seems to be the only one who wants to work and serve customers. Tron, an African American roommate, only uses the juice machine to mix liquor and marijuana for himself. The roommates become frustrated with Chad's work ethic with roommate Tyree asking, "What is your problem man? Why you want to work so hard?" (I, 6). The male African American roommates hang out in the alley behind the juice bar, playing dice and eventually running away when they hear police sirens. The climate of the house becomes even more strained when all of Chad's possessions are stolen during a party and Tyree stabs Chad's dad who stopped by for a visit. Eventually, the roommates call a meeting to kick out Chad because they "do not feel safe with [him] in the house anymore," echoing the terms on which David Edwards was thrown out.

In order for this sketch to be interpreted counter-hegemonically, it is important for viewers to interpret it as a parody. Chappelle encourages this reading with his set-up to the sketch:

> The thing that makes me like mad, not mad but I just don't like this about *The Real World* is every few years they always put a Black guy on there and try to make him look crazy. Like he'll freak out, but it's like of course he's going to freak out – you put him around six of the craziest White people you could find and then expect him to live a normal life. They would not like that if we made a show where we put one White guy around six of the craziest Black people we could find. (I, 6)

During this intro, Chappelle emphasizes that these are "six of the craziest Black people" and not a representation of normal or average African Americans. He also points out the root cause of many racial conflicts on *The Real World* is not the fault of the Black cast-

members, but a volatile environment created by the "craziest White people you could find." In terms of the time viewers spend watching Chappelle's introduction versus how much time they spend watching the sketch, however, the emphasis seems to be on the antics of "The Mad Real World" housemates. Audience members would likely need to keep Chappelle's introduction in their mind throughout their viewing of the sketch in order to maintain a counter-hegemonic reading.

But is that reading likely with few other textual clues to guide viewers in the counter-hegemonic direction? Unlike many of the other sketches, the levels of studio audience laughter were only moderate throughout the sketch – there were not many "big" jokes that drew a lot of laughter or applause. Viewers at home did not hear contemplative silence or raucous laughter following either depictions of African American stereotypes or the ironic parody (at least what was likely *intended* to be an ironic parody of David Edwards' treatment) at the end when kind and hard-working Chad was kicked out for making the other roommates feel unsafe. Instead, this long sketch that is chock-full of negative stereotypes could resonate with and reinforce viewers' own prejudices.

Trading Spouses

This next sketch is another overt reality-television parody, this time of the FOX program *Trading Spouses,* in which two wives change homes for a period of time and must interact with a family that often has values or a lifestyle that is drastically different from their own. The White host of the *Chappelle's Show* parody proclaims that "for the first time on our show, we're going interracial" before introducing the two families: Leonard, Sharron, and T-Mart Washington, the African American family, and Todd,

Katie, and Jeffrey Jacobson, the White family (I, 12). In this situation, the fathers (both portrayed by Chappelle, who dons a jheri curl and cigarette when playing Leonard Washington and his typical "White face" costume including a light brown wig and light brown makeup when playing Todd Jacobson) are the ones to trade houses. In this sketch, the dominant stereotypes illustrated by the men are that the African American patriarch is lazy and sometimes physically violent, while the White patriarch is passive, dorky, and sexually awkward. The differences between the families are represented in the fathers' disparate behaviors, thus positioning them as metonyms for their race. The mothers in contrast seem similar in many ways, both exhibiting kind and caring behaviors.

While it is potentially counter-hegemonic that African Americans and Whites are both caricatured in this sketch, there is a difference in the valence of the stereotypes: The African American stereotype of being violent is potentially more negative and anti-social than the White stereotype of "dorky." As he first enters the Jacobson's home for the swap, African American patriarch Leonard threatens to beat son Jeffery's ass if Jeffery looks through his belongings. Leonard also makes his expectations clear to swapped wife Katie Jacobson. He tells Katie that he doesn't wash dishes and when Katie protests, Leonard responds, "You'd better check your tone girl. Keep your inside voice on 'cause I'll put your ass outside" (I, 12). Leonard and Katie do not cultivate a strong relationship, and toward the end of the sketch they see a therapist. Uncomfortable with couples counseling, Leonard proclaims "bitch, I'll never forgive you for this," raises his fist at Katie, and tells her to get in the car. After Katie leaves, Leonard tells the therapist he's crazy and threatens to kill her, echoing the violent and "crazy" behavior of some of the African American housemates on "The Mad Real World."

White patriarch Todd, on the other hand is ridiculed for his lack of discipline and strange sexual behaviors. When Sharron requests that he punish her son T-Mart for back-talking, Todd puts T-Mart in a 15 minute time-out, also making a goofy hand gesture forming a "T" to symbolize "time-out." The swapped couples are both sexually intimate, but have a few incompatibilities. Leonard is disappointed that Katie has waxed her bikini area for she "done scorched the earth." And Sharron seems troubled when Todd asks if they can turn off the R and B music so he can hear her breathing. Todd also marks himself as sexually reserved and strange when he forgoes taking off his bottoms in favor of pulling his penis through the hole in his pajamas.

Other racial differences are highlighted such as disparate household reading materials – Todd picks up one of the Washington's magazines and seems to be unfamiliar with the phrase "racial profiling," while Leonard draws more laughter from the studio audience exclaiming "who the fuck is Renée Zellweger?" after picking up one of the Jacobson's magazines. One of the most notable clips, which was shown in many of the program's previews, is of White son Jeffrey imitating rappers and saying he's "from the streets." Leonard responds by actually dropping Jeffrey off on a dark street corner and saying "tell 'em when you see them that Leonard Washington is glad he made it out" (I, 12). These incongruities in life experiences may work to unmask White privilege – the privilege to not be subjected to racial profiling, or the privilege to grow up in suburbia and only learn about the "streets" from music.

Toward the end of the sketch, racial differences are minimized. Leonard offers his summary of the swap experience: "Being on this show taught me that no matter where you come from you know what I'm saying or what color your skin is we all pretty much

do the same things in life – raise our kids, make love from time to time, and wash" (I, 12). Sharron also states "in a different world I could see myself with Todd." Even with these messages of racial harmony, the last laugh seems to be at White people's expense and the Washingtons are discursively repositioned as the more "normal" family. Leonard continues with his summary noting that he "learned that White people don't use wash cloths," and expressing disgust about everyone in the house using the same bar of soap. Sharron finishes her thought that although she could see herself with Todd (in a different world), "the penis through the hole thing was kind of weird and I am missing some of my drawers." Viewers are left with the image of Todd smelling what are presumably Sharron's bras and underwear.

The Racial Draft

Season one of *Chappelle's Show* opened with a bang, featuring the infamous "Clayton Bigsby: Blind White Supremacist" sketch and the season two opener also engaged in explicit commentary about racial differences and racism with "The Racial Draft." After he welcomes the audience back to *Chappelle's Show*, "America's number one source for offensive comedy," Chappelle explains the rationale behind having a draft that will decisively categorize people of mixed (or otherwise non-definitive) racial or ethnic backgrounds: "My wife's Asian and I'm Black and we argue – about which half of Tiger Woods is hitting the ball so good. [. . .] We need to stop arguing about who is what. We need to just settle this once and for all" (II, 1). As the sketch proceeds in a sports-style draft, Tiger Woods (played by Chappelle) officially becomes "100% Black" and says "so long fried rice, hello fried chicken." The Jewish delegate chooses Lenny

Kravitz, the Latino representative adopts Elian Gonzalez, the White team selects Colin Powell (which the Black team only allows if the Whites will also take Condoleeza Rice off their hands), and the Asian group makes a surprise move by choosing African American rap group, the Wu-Tang Clan.[4]

This sketch evokes several racial, ethnic, and religious stereotypes. Racial and ethnic lines are drawn when the announcers speculate about who the White and Chinese delegations will pick. A White announcer predicts that the Whites will choose Oprah because she has "no felonies," while Chappelle speculates that the Chinese group will take Yao Ming because "he's been spending a lot of time with Blacks learning slang and shit talking. If they're not careful they might lose him" (II, 1). These two statements associate committing felonies and engaging in "shit talking" as common behaviors of African Americans, situating the discourse of the sketch within existing symbolic systems of stereotypes. The studio audience laughter also creates a sense of "pleasure in recognition" of some stereotypes. For example, there is much laughter when Tiger Woods' character says "so long fried rice, hello fried chicken." Also, when Lenny Kravitz is chosen by the Jewish delegation, a White announcer explains that Kravitz's mom is an African American actress and Kravitz's dad was his mom's Jewish lawyer. Again, there is much laughter from the perceived punch line the announcer delivers saying that you "couldn't make that up." These stereotypes do not seem to challenge dominant stereotypical discourses, but associate audience pleasure with stereotype-confirming discourses.

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[4] The grouping of the delegation is also potentially troubling in that it does not account for cultural specificity within the groups, lumping together all "Asians" and "Latinos."

"The Racial Draft" also has many potentially subversive elements, particularly with its direct references to discrimination against African Americans. One of the most notable counter-hegemonic messages from the sketch comes along with the discussion of Tiger Woods' selection by the African Americans. In the conversation that follows Woods' selection, Chappelle (assuming the role of commentator) addresses some realities of racism in society. He remarks "[Woods has] been discriminated against in his time, he's had death threats, and he dates a White woman – sounds like a Black guy to me." Chappelle also reports that Woods lost all of his endorsements after being proclaimed Black.

The two primary jokes about discrimination against African Americans – facing death threats and losing endorsements – follow a similar discursive form of representing serious commentary about discrimination, then shifting to a punch line that makes light of the situation and rhetorically offers a space for cathexis or emotional discharge. For example, in Chappelle's list of characteristics that make Tiger Woods "Black," he moves from more serious to less serious issues by addressing death threats and racism, then moving on to Woods' interracial partnership. Unlike the serious issues of discrimination and death threats, Chappelle's statement that Woods "dates a White woman" does not allude to the benefits of White privilege. Similarly, Chappelle raises the serious issue of discrimination when stating that Woods has lost all of his endorsements after being declared "Black." However, he tempers the foray into issues of racism and White privilege by dismissing the negative turn of events, and stating with a smile, "tough break, n-----, there's always FUBU." These humorous cathartic shifts from seriousness to non-seriousness are reinforced by audible studio-audience laughter.

The opening joke of the Racial Draft offers a somewhat different opportunity for emotional relief. When Chappelle remarks that this is "the first lottery a Black person's won in a long time" and a White announcer laughs saying "they'll probably still complain," Chappelle draws the loudest studio-audience laughter when he retorts through his smile saying "fuck you" to the other announcer. He does not become visibly angry, nor does he challenge the White announcers' offensive assumptions, but he does have the last word. Chappelle's response may be well-received with studio-audience laughter and applause because he has won the discursive battle in this exchange, modeling a symbolic victory over racial discrimination that resonates with some viewers' desires.

The entire sketch also addresses a notable social issue that precedes discrimination – the United States' emphasis on racial and ethnic categories and biological definitions for one's belonging in a particular category. The sketch has the potential to encourage viewers to question the constructedness of these categories, or it may reify the drive to classify. The Tiger Woods character expresses joy at being selected by the Black delegation. He says: "This is a tremendous opportunity for me to finally be part of a race, to have a home. [I've] been so confused if I'm Cablicalasian, so many things." This statement makes it seem that a multiracial or multiethnic person necessarily feels out of place or distressed by not being able to assume one classification. It also pokes fun at Woods' portmanteau: The real Woods describes himself as "Cablinasian" blending Caucasian, Asian, American Indian, and Black, but Chappelle seems to purposely botch the term as he does the Woods imitation. There is also turmoil over the White delegation's selection of Colin Powell because, as one of the White announcers says, "he's not even one-eighth Black." This reference to proportions of racial heritage

echoes the rhetoric surrounding Jim Crow era "one-drop" rules that promote biological conceptions of race and the exclusivity of the White race.

The entire sketch may also be viewed as a progressive statement parodying racial and ethnic labels. Many people in the United States and elsewhere are of mixed races or choose not to be classified by one race or ethnicity, and this humorous draft process potentially exposes the ridiculousness of making people fit into neat categories. The sketch references other racially or ethnically mixed celebrities including Halle Berry, Derek Jeter, and Mariah Carey, thus helping to demonstrate the prevalence of people whose identities resist classification. Also, the one-drop rule is thrown out the window when the Asian team selects the African American members of the Wu-Tang Clan as their pick – the announcers do not question the Wu-Tang Clan's heritage and the "pick" goes off without a complaint from the other delegations.

The Niggar Family[5]

This sketch has an intertextual relationship with the 1960s sit-com *Leave it to Beaver,* appearing to be set in the 1950s or 60s and featuring the daily lives of a "proper" nuclear family; however, in place of the Cleaver family, we have the Niggar family. The Niggar family is White and many of the jokes revolve around African American stereotypes and racism in the way that other people respond to members of the Niggar family. Chappelle's introduction to the sketch offers a potential glimpse into the

5 The spelling "Niggar" appears at the start of the sketch to introduce the show and the spelling is highlighted in the opening song.

ambivalent reception of *Chappelle's Show* and his (professed) intentions with this particular sketch:

> Last season we started the series off with this sketch about a Black White supremacist. Very controversial, yeah. Very. Sparked this whole controversy about the appropriateness of the N word, the dreaded N word. And then you know when I would travel, people would come up to me, White people would come up to me and say 'man you know the sketch you did about them n-----s – that was hilarious.' Take it easy, you know I was joking around. You start to realize these sketches in the wrong hands are dangerous. You know and that N word is a doozy, especially for us Black folks. . . . But what if we just use the word for other people? Would it be so bad? I don't know. So I made a sketch. It's about a White family whose last name happens to be Niggar. That's all. Let's see how offensive the word seems now (II, 2).

The previous quote is full of depth about the nuances of humor and parody that rely on racial epithets. At times in the press Chappelle has seemed ambivalent himself about the power of the "N word" (and about the way his work is received by other African Americans). In an interview from 2004, he stated "I'm not so concerned when black intellectuals say the N-word is awful. If people stop saying the N-word is everything going to be equal?" (Ogunnaike E5). Chappelle acknowledges that some White people he had spoken with did not seem to understand the magnitude of the N word when used in his sketches – and he does not seem pleased about that reaction. His statement that "these sketches in the wrong hands are dangerous" strikes at the heart of the concept of ambivalence in viewers' interactions with stereotype-driven humor. However, Chappelle does not seem to believe that the end to racism lies in the end of the N word. And perhaps instead of banning the N word, overusing the word and putting it in a different context on "The Niggar Family" sketch represents a way to diminish its hurtful power.

In addition to potentially desensitizing viewers to the power of the N word, the sketch may reinforce several negative stereotypes about African Americans. For example,

when his son sleeps late one morning, Mr. Niggar calls him "one lazy Niggar," a phrase that seems to just roll off his tongue much like Mr. Niggar's exclamation that his baby niece has "those Niggar lips." It seems that African American stereotypes are the main joke fodder for most of this sketch. Chappelle, playing the family's African American milkman, Clifton, also espouses several stereotypes in his interactions with the family. Toward the end of his morning visit with the family, Clifton remarks, "I hate to bother you about this, but you didn't pay your bill last week and I know how forgetful you Niggars are about paying bills." It seems that this sketch derives much of its humor from discursive patterns of racism. It replicates African American stereotypes, but does not alter their underlying meanings – the sketch just situates them in an incongruous context and is accompanied by much studio audience laughter in the process.

Much like the racial draft, this sketch may also function counter-hegemonically by addressing the discrimination that African Americans face. For example, when a White man finds out that his daughter has a date with "the Niggar boy from school," he is concerned and angry until he finds out that "Niggar" is just the boy's last name. The father utilizes stereotypes and a patronizing pattern of complimenting African Americans when he says, "[Timmy Niggar is] a very good athlete and so well-spoken." Timmy and his date also run into Clifton and his wife when they are all waiting for their table in a restaurant, leading to more discussion (albeit non-serious) about racism. Clifton exclaims to Timmy, "I bet you'll get the finest table a n----- ever got in this restaurant [the cast laughs]. Oh lord, this racism is killing me inside [more laughter from the cast and audience]." I think it is also positive that in this restaurant scene, the word n----- is also marked as a derogatory term when applied to Clifton. When the maître d' calls "Niggar

party of two," Clifton does not realize that the table of two was for Timmy Niggar and his date. Clifton exclaims, "just because we're colored doesn't mean we came out here to be disrespected!"

Overall, the sketch trivializes the N word by using it so casually, which may have counter-hegemonic consequences if the hurtful power of the word is diminished, or hegemonic consequences if it prompts non-African Americans to use the word more frequently and not consider its historical roots of discrimination. Furthermore, there does not seem to be any inversion of the racist discourse: The N word is still marked as offensive toward the end, and is still used to reindividuate racist stereotypes. The only difference is that a White family is the target of the insults. While the racial incongruity may make the sketch humorous, the humor itself is still situated within the discursive confines of racist stereotypes.

Two Legal Systems

This next sketch is set up as social commentary about racial discrimination in the prosecution of crimes. It depicts an enactment of how White white-collar criminal Charles Jeffries and African American drug dealer Tron Carter would be treated if the justice system underwent a reversal in racial discrimination. Chappelle describes the recent news events that inspired the sketch:

> These major corporations they rip everybody off. These Enrons and Tycos. . . . They don't get no time in jail. I've got to get in on this being White thing. It's like there's two legal systems damn near. It would be better if they just for like maybe three days if like they actually put those guys through the legal system that we all have to go through and they put crack dealers and shit through the legal system that they go through (II, 5).

Although serious statements about racism in society are often devoid of studio audience laughter, the audience responds with amusement when Chappelle remarks "that he's got to get in on this being White thing." As with many of his punch lines, Chappelle pauses slightly and speaks with a higher voice when saying he's got to "get in on this being White thing." When accompanied by laughter, this serious content of his statement may be seen in a non-serious frame – that Chappelle is really just joking around or that it's a non-serious subject. The special edition of *Law and Order* that follows shows sets of law enforcement officials treating Jefferies with violence and deception, and, in contrast, being extremely lenient and accommodating to Carter.

Although there are many positive elements of this sketch, including the overt social commentary, the racial segregation of the criminal activities potentially reinforces pre-circulating stereotypes. As mentioned previously, Tron is a stock character in *Chappelle's Show* and this repeat performance may reinforce the drug-dealing stereotype that is associated with African Americans in popular culture (see Means Coleman 7, 9). Tron packs bags of cocaine, asks the police if he can "still traffic rocks to the community," and compares himself to Nino Brown, the ruthless drug lord of the film *New Jack City.* The segregated portrayal may encourage viewers to see drug use and drug dealing as a problem that is primarily housed in the African American community.

Another aspect of the sketch that my reify stereotypes is that much of the humor of the sketch seems to come from racist African American jokes that are made toward Jefferies. For example, Jefferies is called a "filthy big lipped beast" and an "animal" by his White judge, which is paired with much studio audience laughter. These jokes raise the same concerns as those made toward the "Niggar" family – the racist jokes remain the

same but are just directed toward White characters, potentially reifying the stereotypes upon which the jokes are premised or sending the message that phrases like these are neutralized and more acceptable in society.

On the positive side, the sketch also establishes an incredibly stark contrast in the treatment of the two men, the layering of which may highlight the social commentary for viewers. The police officers do not follow proper procedures when arresting both men – just in very different ways. For example, a swat team comes to arrest Jeffries, killing his golden retriever, terrifying his wife, and brutally handcuffing him although he wasn't resisting arrest. Later in the interrogation room, he is assaulted and assigned legal counsel who is already overwhelmed with cases. In contrast, police call Carter on the phone to schedule a time that works for him to turn himself in. Carter arrives at the precinct several hours later than he says he will, and detectives are still happily waiting for him with a delicious cheese spread. Instead of an interrogation, Carter receives apologies from the detectives and cuts a deal.

The brazen disparities continue at their trials. The judged calls Jefferies names and he receives life in prison from the "jury of his peers" (who are ironically all African Americans). Meanwhile, Tron testifies in front of a Senate committee (pleading the Fifth Amendment every time he is asked a question) and is only sentenced to one month in "club fed." The detectives also give him permission to continue selling drugs after he gets out of prison. As the sketch cuts back and forth between the two men's stories, it perpetually forces viewers to adjust their expectations and switch between discriminatory and lenient legal frames. Due to these forced shifts in orientations, it may be more

difficult for viewers to become absorbed in one story or another and thus lose sight of the irony and satire.

While police corruption is not a unique subject in film and television, the harsh treatment for a White man and lenient treatment of an African American man provides viewers with images that are inconsistent with many popular culture portrayals and news reports. The message of racial discrimination in the justice system can be very powerful as the relaxed punishments for White collar crimes (often committed by White criminals) were ripped from recent headlines and viewers are encouraged, through the sketch's introduction and the layering of the stories, to see this as a satire of recent events.

Dave in Jury Selection

"Dave in Jury Selection" continues with a similar theme of racism in the justice system. Chappelle opens the sketch with a reference to his conversations with (White) co-writer Neal Brennan over the guilt of African American celebrities who have been accused of crimes. Chappelle admits that he thinks many should not be convicted, noting that "what's a reasonable doubt for a White person, you know, might not be a reasonable doubt for a Black person." He proceeds with a sketch that depicts him being interviewed for jury selection at the trials of O.J. Simpson, Michael Jackson, Robert Blake, and R. Kelley (II, 9).

By highlighting the trials of African American celebrities, the sketch may potentially reinforce the focus on their alleged crimes. Although Chappelle does not admit that the charges are true or say that he would convict the celebrities if on their jury, he does hint that he thinks they are guilty. In the Simpson murder trial, the lawyer finally asks Chappelle if he will "at least admit that OJ more than likely killed his wife" to which

Chappelle responds, “Sir, my Blackness will not permit me to make a statement” (II, 9). Chappelle also proclaims Michael Jackson’s innocence until the lawyer asks if he’d let his kids sleep in Jackson’s bed. Chappelle replies adamantly, “fuck no!” In the R. Kelly segment, Chappelle has several rebuttals to explain why the videotape and witness testimony regarding Kelly’s sexual assault of a minor is not enough proof. However, in an infamous sketch from episode 10 of season one, *Chappelle’s Show* seems to reinforce R. Kelly’s guilt with its spoof video of “(I Wanna) Pee on You” that shows Chappelle acting as R. Kelly and spraying young women with urine.

Some of the major issues involving racism at the trials are also represented, but often they are punctuated with silliness, potentially undermining the social critique. For example, Chappelle brings up police detective Mark Furhman’s racism during the Simpson jury selection. Chappelle has a non-serious lead-in when first being told that the detective’s name is Fuhrman, saying it sounds like “Fuhrer” and “German.” However, the prosecution confirms his suspicions admitting that the detective is a possible racist and that there may have been some minor oversights in the investigation. The sketch pushes its social commentary strongest toward its end. When pressed by a lawyer that his doubts about Kelly’s guilt are unreasonable, Chappelle responds,

> Look, we’re talking about a justice system that has 500 people whose cases were overturned by DNA evidence. I’ve seen a tape where five cops beat up a n----- and they said they had a reasonable doubt. I got my doubts, too. All right? How come they never found Biggie and Tupac’s murderer, but they arrested O.J. the next day? (II, 9)

With this summary, Chappelle points out several injustices and racial disparities that may have inculcated in him and many other African Americans distrust for the legal system. Chappelle’s powerful closing statement is somewhat overshadowed by the silly punch

line that (compared to Biggie and Tupac) "Nicole Simpson can't rap. I want justice!" Although the monologue would likely have a greater impact without the reference to Nicole Simpson's rapping abilities, the point of racial disparities in the justice system may still resonate with some viewers.

Keeping it Real

"Keeping it Real" involves a series of sketches that demonstrate what happens "when keeping it real goes wrong" (II, 6; II, 7; II, 8). The sketches seem to use the phrase "keeping it real" as a reference to sticking up for oneself or showing toughness to other people either through words or physical violence. As Chappelle observes in the intro, sometimes "keeping it real can work against you" (II, 6). All three of the sketches feature African Americans who have chosen to fight back against an action or a comment that offended them: They end up either poor or in prison.

The potentially harmful stereotype that is most obvious in these sketches has to do with the violence and seemingly irrational acts that end up costing the African American characters quite a lot in their lives. In the first installment, Darius James (played by Chappelle) chooses to fight with a man who has offended him by speaking with James' girlfriend. Unfortunately, James gets beat up, loses his girlfriend ("all his talk about keeping it real was getting on [her] last nerves"), and has to move in with his grandmother so he can pay his medical bills. In the second installment, Vernon Franklin is a successful businessman who is offended when a White colleague says he's "the man" and requests that Vernon give him "some skin." Vernon threatens his colleagues, barks, and yells out "thug life" in the meeting, which ultimately cost him his job. Vernon ends

up earning minimum wage as a gas station attendant. Brenda's story is perhaps the saddest of all. After a woman calls and hangs up on her, Brenda becomes angry, tracking down the woman and ruining the woman's car. The car Brenda destroyed was unfortunately a government vehicle, earning Brenda six years in federal prison where she continues to "keep it real" and gets beat up.

Collectively, these three stories about African Americans whose lives have been ruined by "keeping it real" are problematic for two primary reasons: 1. they associate African Americans with violence, poverty, and imprisonment and 2. seem to relegate social problems such as poverty and imprisonment to individual decisions, thus ignoring structural inequalities that contribute to such problems in the African American community. A male announcer narrates the sketches, providing some background on the participants and interpreting what has happened. While the "present day" action of the sketches draws associations between African Americans and violence, poverty, and imprisonment, the background of Vernon Franklin's life enhances the saliency of these connections. The announcer explains that Vernon "got a good job and worked 14 hour days, six days a week, quickly becoming the youngest vice president in the history of the Viacorp Corporation, ending the cycle of violence and drug addiction that had plagued his family for generations." It was Vernon's "irrational" decision that led him from financial success to minimum wage, highlighting the impact of his individual actions in determining his fate. According to the narrator, Brenda's imprisonment was similarly blamed on her foolish decisions: "Brenda had a simple choice to make. Ignore the simple rudeness of someone hanging up on her. Or keep it real."

Out of the collection of three "Keeping it Real" sketches, the Vernon Franklin story offers the most productive social commentary, for it addresses an issue of discrimination and discomfort that many non-Whites face in the workplace (and is not just about simple matter such as hanging up the phone on someone or talking to someone's girlfriend). After his boss says "give me some skin," Vernon expresses his frustration at feeling patronized:

> Just shake my hand like a man. 'Give me some five on the back hand side with all this crazy jive.' That's bullshit. Do you want me to softshoe? Should I shuck some watermelon for you boss? Fuck all that! (II, 7)

Vernon's look of disgust after his boss initially makes the comment is paired with much studio audience laughter, potentially signaling that this experience is not unusual. Vernon's animated response also draws cheers, suggesting that members of the audience empathized with his plight. The issue of White co-workers attempting to use slang with African American co-workers was also addressed on the sitcom *Scrubs* (episode 112) and seems to have resonated with the studio audience of *Chappelle's Show.* An African American man in the audience for season three praised the sketch for illustrating how he feels when co-workers use slang such as "aight" and "what up shorty" in his presence (III, 2). Although there seem to be no underlying progressive messages in the series' other two sketches, the Vernon Franklin sketch can serve as a model illustrating uncomfortable experiences that some African Americans go through and gently educating other people about those experiences.

Profiles in Courage

Social movements are not a common topic on *Chappelle's Show*, but the civil rights struggle is the backdrop for "Profiles in Courage." The sketch describes the social climate of 1954 including the Montgomery bus boycott and the Brown vs. Board of Education trial, thus setting the scene of the fictitious trial of African American Cyrus Holloway. As a White journalist narrates the story, a picture of Malcolm X and images of other notable leaders and scenes from the civil rights movement can be seen in the background. Holloway is part of the fight for integration, but his fight is also the subject of an extensive poop joke – Holloway is credited for taking "one of the most significant dumps in American history" and inspiring restroom integration (II, 13).

This sketch may be used in hegemonic ways if viewers interpret it as a parody of serious struggles that took place in the civil rights movement. The issue of bathroom integration and any integration of public spaces is very important, yet the poop jokes seem to undercut that significance. For example, Holloway (played by Chappelle) describes the early stages of "mud butt" that led him to the White restroom, for the "colored bathroom" "wasn't fit for Christian butt cheeks." The story proceeds to show African American protesters having a "shit in" on toilets with pants down and newspapers in hand. Charles Welton, a fictitious African American civil rights leader asks the government, "why can't my turds float next to yours?" and instructs the protesters to turn their "butt cheeks toward the aggressor." The retaliatory garden hose water that comes from the police force is not close to the strength of the fire hoses that were directed against actual civil rights activists, potentially trivializing the bravery of real activists. Finally, Holloway's response to his court victory focuses on the mundane

aspects, and not the social significance of integration: “I suppose I was happy about winning, but the thing that I was most happy about was I could get up from that courtroom and use the toilet. [He farts] I just remember going into that bathroom and taking the first free dump I’d ever taken in my life. A beautiful dump.” Throughout the sketch, the loudest studio audience laughter can be heard following poop jokes and audible flatulence.

While the non-serious tone may function to trivialize the civil rights movement, the sketch may also be interpreted by viewers as a parody of segregation. The White police officer who arrested Holloway was cruel, sending attack dogs after him while he was on the toilet, and also unintelligent demonstrated by his bringing Holloway’s feces to the police station as evidence. Chappelle may have also framed the sketch in a way that positions Whites as the target of the jokes. At the beginning of the sketch, he explains that his grandmother told him “don’t ever be the first Black person to do anything because anytime you hear about the first Black dudes that did something it’s a terrible story.” This statement may evoke thoughts of White racism and the challenges African Americans face exercising rights that many others take for granted.

Stereotype Pixies

I will end the analysis of individual sketches with one of most controversial sketches on the show, the filming of which led to Chappelle’s hasty departure for Africa. Taking over in Chappelle’s absence, Donnell Rawlings and Charlie Murphy introduce the sketch and engage the studio audience members in a discussion about their interpretations (which will be referenced further in the qualitative section of this dissertation). Murphy

prefaces the sketch by stating that it is intended to duplicate situations in which "you actually altered your behavior because you're afraid of the way you know someone of a different color may react or they possibly may think you were living up to a stereotype" (III, 2). In this series of sketches, African American, Asian, Latino, and White "pixies" (played by Chappelle dressed differently for each race/ethnicity and made to appear miniature) speak to various people and urge them to fulfill racial or ethnic stereotypes.

Like many of the other sketches, viewers' interpretations of the racial implications likely hinge on the satiric quality. In the sketch featuring the African American pixie, Chappelle is on a plane deciding his in-flight meal. He is reluctant to order the chicken option and thus reinforce the stereotype that African Americans like to eat fried chicken, but the pixie (Chappelle dressed in blackface) tap dances, sings, and berates Chappelle, urging him to order the chicken. Most of the studio audience laughter in this sketch can be heard after the pixie tap dances and sings "allelujiah" and "make way for the bird" when the flight attendant claims that they are out of the fish option.

The Latino pixie (dressed as a bullfighter and playing castinettes) represents more anti-social stereotypes encouraging a Latino man to get leopard-skin seat covers for his car – at a cheap price because they are stolen. The Latino pixie also calls on celebrity Charro to give him some cocaine, which is accompanied by much studio audience laughter. The Asian pixie (Chappelle dressed as a samurai) makes fun of an Asian man Yoshi's difficulty in pronouncing the letter "L." When Charlie Murphy introduces Yoshi to the celebrity La La, the pixie encourages the man to say "Herro Ra Ra." Finally, the White pixie (who wears a plaid suit) urges a White man Phil to use "their own vernacular" when interacting with his three African American friends. The pixie quotes

rap lyrics without seeming to understand them, discourages Phil from dancing with a woman whose posterior has a lot of "meat," and warns Phil not to do any dances other than the twist.

Some of the stereotypes are arguably more negative than others. For example, the drug use and theft in the Latino sketch is potentially more damaging than the dorky stereotypes articulated in the White pixie sketch. This point is echoed by a woman in the audience who notes,

> I feel like it's derogatory to Black and Spanish people but it plays on the good stereotypes of White people. Even though there's a pixie for the White people it plays on that they're educated and that you know they listen to rock music but that's not bad. But to play on we like chicken and we like shukkin' and jiving . . . (III, 2)

However, a few of the other audience members (who appeared to be African American and White) countered that the stereotypes were not that bad.

The sketch also exposes the stereotypes as inaccurate representations that cannot be applied to every person based on their race. All of the characters somehow evade the stereotypes that the pixies encourage. The African American man eats the fish instead of chicken, the Latino man walks out without getting the stolen seat covers, the Asian man says "Hello gorgeous" to avoid using many Ls in the name "La La," and the White man doesn't embarrass himself on the dance floor (according to the pixie who exclaims "Damn this B.E.T! You look so comfortable Phil!").

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from this rhetorical analysis that there are many nuances to the race-based stereotypes that serve as the basis for much of *Chappelle's Show's* humor. Both

hegemonic and counter-hegemonic readings may be made of the 12 sketches discussed here, including several prominent themes of ambivalence related to stereotype caricatures, the use of racial slurs, and the blending of social commentary with non-serious jokes.

The non-subtle depiction of stereotypes may function to reify those stereotypes in the minds of some viewers or it may shatter those negative stereotypes if the portrayals are interpreted as satires. With regard to the satiric quality of the texts, it is productive to have Chappelle introduce the serious issues upon which some of the sketches are premised in order to encourage viewers to not just see reproductions of stereotypes, but social commentary. For example, in the "Mad Real World" sketch, the African American characters were meant to be seen as "six of the craziest Black people," counterparts to the six crazy White people commonly seen on seasons of *The Real World* who have arguably scapegoated Black roommates in the past. However, that point may be easily lost when the actions of the African Americans repeat stereotypes of violence and drug use that are readily available on other television shows and are incorporated throughout many other *Chappelle's Show* sketches. The same can be said for the Pixie sketches that showcase stereotypes, but include no overt social commentary within the immediate frame of the sketches. The repeated depiction of stereotypes can be seen in many sketches, thereby potentially normalizing the representations and undercutting their satiric quality.

Similarly, the persistent use of the N word may function hegemonically, normalizing the word's perceived acceptability in the minds of some viewers. While using the word in different context (such as the last name of a White family) has the potential to change the word's meaning in some people's minds, it cannot erode the entire

historically-rooted meaning attached with the racist epithet in one swoop. Furthermore, many uses of the N word in sketches such as "The Niggar Family" invert the context of the word, but maintain the same discursive patterns of discrimination. For example, when the White patriarch proclaims that his son is "one lazy Niggar" and that his new niece has "those Niggar lips," the traditional meaning of the word as a vehicle of discrimination is not challenged.

Stereotype inversion is a common humor strategy on the program. In addition to the example of the White "Niggar" family, "Clayton Bigsby the Blind White Supremacist" and "Two Legal Systems" also illustrate the inversion using role reversal for Whites and African Americans (an African American plays a White supremacist and White and African American criminals are treated differently by the justice system). The varying contexts can work to create ironic layering between the context and the discourse, encouraging viewers to shift orientations often and maintain an ironic or satiric frame. Although this seems to work well in "Two Legal Systems" with a constant shift between the portrayals of the White and African American criminals, there are many examples of stereotypical discourse built in to the inversion that do not challenge the hegemonic discourse, but just apply it to a different target (i.e. calling the White criminal a "filthy, big-lipped beast"). This inversion may function hegemonically when it is seen as a vehicle of desensitization, encouraging viewers that such discourses are acceptable. Opposingly, if viewers can maintain an ironic meaning, the ridiculousness of such discourses may be undermined.

Textual framing, such as layering serious and non-serious discourses or introducing the sketch by discussing the serious social issues upon which the sketch is

premised, may encourage viewers to maintain a critical focus on the comedy and its messages. For example, Paul Mooney punctuates his humorous discourse in "Ask a Black Dude" (which sometimes draws from stereotypes) with stronger, more serious social criticism about discrimination in Hollywood and the sad consequences of drug abuse. "Dave in Jury Selection" and "The Racial Draft" are two sketches that also exemplify this alternation in tone, weaving references to serious issues of racism throughout their humorous discourse. These switches between serious and non-serious discourse can potentially encourage the viewers to be more critical of the messages in the jokes and not just react with a non-serious frame of passive amusement.

In terms of acts of discrimination, *Chappelle's Show* is an example of minor discourse. The program may give voice to African Americans who experience various forms of discrimination in their daily lives, thereby functioning as a gentle social corrective as Kenneth Burke argued. On the contrary, these depictions of racism may trivialize the perceived impact that discrimination has on African Americans. In the second installment of "Keeping it Real," the audience is privy to the patronizing treatment Vernon Franklin receives from his White co-worker and mentor. As the audience laughs at the image of Vernon working at a gas station, the announcer remarks that Vernon "could've ignored the simple comment his mentor made." Again, this closing to the sketch signals that Vernon had many opportunities for success but that his irrational decision is the sole reason for his poverty. Another sketch that seems to belittle the impact of discrimination is "Animal Racism in Hollywood." Paul Mooney's commentary addresses serious examples of Hollywood racism, but "Animal Racism in Hollywood" may make a mockery of the issue by featuring African Americans who

recount discriminatory behaviors of Rin Tin Tin (an alleged attack dog in the civil rights movement), Mr. Ed (a "bigot ass horse"), and Flipper (known as "James the n----- hating dolphin). The ridiculousness of racist animals may undercut the seriousness of other social commentary related to discrimination.

It is clear that assessing only the content of a given mediated text will not always uncover the full richness of the meanings that may be created when various viewers interact with a humorous text. Humor is premised on incongruities that can lead to ambivalent interpretations. As Gray states regarding the effects *In Living Color:* "In the end, the show's representations and the meanings they organize are inherently neither progressive nor reactionary; instead, they are potentially both, depending on how they are taken up, by whom, and under what social conditions" (132). Race-based humor can be oppressive and resistant at the same time, depending upon the context, as well as who is creating the entertainment and who is watching. Now that we have addressed the text itself and discussed the production of the program, the following two chapters will turn toward the next piece of the interpretive puzzle – the audience.

Chapter 5: Qualitative Analysis of *Chappelle's Show* Viewer Focus Groups

After describing the potentially ambivalent interpretations of a dozen *Chappelle's Show* sketches, this chapter complements those observations by analyzing the focus group discourse of *Chappelle's Show* viewers regarding their opinions of the program and its potential social ramifications. The discussions in the focus groups revolved around *Chappelle's Show* in general, although the participants were encouraged to think of specific sketches and examples that supported their opinions about the program. This dissertation draws from cultural studies theories, including John Fiske's argument about the polysemy of humorous mediated discourse. Fiske explains that television programs contain "short, self-contained segments linked by association rather than by logic," which allows for greater openness than a film that presents a more coherent narrative argument ("Polysemy" 402). *Chappelle's Show* can perhaps be considered even more open because each episode is formatted as a series of independent sketches. By gathering viewers' opinions of the general program, I learned more about the meanings they made with the program and what meanings they found to be the most relevant.

Due to strategic polysemy in the authorship or production of racial stereotype-driven humor in mediated texts and the potential ambivalence in viewer interpretations of that humor, scholars must employ a variety of methods in order to understand the multiplicity of meanings that may result from text/viewer interactions; qualitative

audience studies are an indispensable piece of that puzzle due to their unique heuristic value of getting at the *process* of meaning-making. Qualitative studies providing a window into viewers' reception processes in contrast to quantitative studies that generally focus on the *products* of meaning (Jensen 32, 33). This chapter begins the audience-based portion of the dissertation, analyzing discourse captured from focus groups with college-age *Chappelle's Show* viewers.

Audience studies in general and qualitative audience studies in particular are recommended for thoroughly examining the motivations behind racism and the ideologies that undergird and perpetuate discrimination. In their study of racial and ethnic humor in *Rush Hour 2,* Park et al. claim that a discussion of the ideological limitations and possibilities of racial stereotypes in comedy cannot be complete without exploring audience's interpretation of the text (165). Similarly, Ramsey, Achter, and Condit argue that the motivational components of racism are not fully understood, thus leading to ineffective efforts at social change (19). They offer that audience studies should complement textual analysis in order to question existing assumptions and enhance the richness and productivity of studies about mediated racism (19). While audience studies may be conducted in many ways, Jensen asserts that qualitative studies are particularly instrumental in studying media phenomenon that are not well-understood and do not have well-established conceptual categories (33).

Because of the heuristic strength of qualitative studies in mining the processes of meaning-making, it is a productive audience-centered method with which to begin understanding a nascent or under-explored media genre. The order of these chapters is purposeful and models my actual research process: The knowledge gained about the

meaning-making processes can help researchers craft survey frameworks that account for many potential products of meaning (Jensen 32). For example, before conducting focus groups I never would have thought that White people who viewed *Chappelle's Show* often and who reported liking the show would think that Whites are subjected to reverse discrimination in the United States with regard to employment and college admissions. Because this subject came up in a focus group, however, I added a category to my survey that measures levels of agreement/disagreement with the statement that there is discrimination against Whites in the United States.

As with any critical methodology, strengths and weaknesses abound in qualitative research. When focus groups are viewed as just an efficient method of interviewing multiple people, the influence of social desirability of the false consensus effect may be seen as weaknesses (Lunt and Livingstone 93). However, I view focus groups as a dynamic group process (not a quick way to carry out personal interviews) and chose to conduct group interviews because college students often watch television in groups. The focus group more closely mimics their actual meaning-making processes compared to individual interviews in which they would not be building or reflecting on the opinions expressed by other people in their immediate space. My focus group participants often piggybacked off of one another's comments, but several also contested the interpretations of other people in their group, tentatively indicating that false consensus did not have a substantial influence on their expressed opinions. The large number of focus groups was also instrumental in moderating the impact of false consensus – I eventually achieved saturation and the groups began replicating information that I had already heard from previous parties.

METHOD

Focus groups were conducted between spring 2005 and fall 2007. Participants were recruited from communication classes at a large southwestern university. Students received extra credit in exchange for their participation and were also provided with light refreshments. All were grouped by their self-identified race or ethnicity per the suggestions of Jensen and Jhally and Lewis that more homogeneous groups (as opposed to groups that were randomly selected) are most useful for understanding distinct interactions with media. Many recent qualitative studies involving issues of race and racism also utilize this strategy (see, for example, Condit, Condit, Dubriwny, Sefcovic, Acosta-Alzuru, Brown-Givens, Dietz, and Parrott; Cooper; Park et al.; Rockler). This strategy was effective judging by the confessions of several Caucasian participants that they would have reduced the honesty of their comments in the presence of an African American (Caucasian Group 4). It is important to note, however, that while people who identify with the same race or ethnicity may be considered part of the same "interpretive community" (Jensen 29), their race or ethnicity does not have a deterministic relationship with their subjectivity. In the analysis I will take care to identify instances in which people of the same race or ethnicity expressed different opinions, thereby resisting essentializing their opinions and attitudes. As Morley explains, a subculture or subject position may be seen as setting "parameters to individual experience although not determining consciousness in a mechanistic way" ("Cultural Transformations" 242).

I conducted a total of 15 groups involving between 3-7 participants each: 5 Caucasian, 3 Hispanic, 2 Asian American, 2 African American, and 2 Asian Indian. The groups are referred to as Caucasian, Hispanic, African American, Asian, and Asian

Indian because that was how the majority self-identified when they volunteered to participate in the focus groups.[6] In addition to the focus groups, I also conducted small interviews with groups of two people: 2 African American dyads and 1 Caucasian dyad. The difference between the responses of the dyads versus the focus groups was not noticeable so I have included that data with the total pool of qualitative discourse. In total, there were 61 participants – 26 female and 35 male.

Self-Reflexivity

Because focus groups involve a moderator who has an impact on the group dynamics and processes, it is important to engage in self-reflexivity about the data collection process. As Charles Lewis explains, a researcher must give an account of the "motivations, assumptions, and data-gathering procedures behind interpretations" ("Making Sense" 288). I conducted all of the focus groups and in this section, I will discuss factors such as my race, the wordings of my questions, and my relationship with some of the participants – factors which may have influenced their responses.

The participants were grouped by their self-identified race or ethnicity, but I self-identify and appear to be White, so my presence likely influenced the social dynamics of the groups. With the African American focus groups in particular, I observed either a real or imagined hesitancy on the part of some participants to discuss White racism. For example, an African American woman responded to my question about the social impact of *Chappelle's Show* saying, "I'm not sure there would be serious social change, but I think it helped give people knowledge on what is really going on with a lot of stuff he's

[6] Although I commonly use the term White to refer to "Caucasians," the majority of the focus group participants identified themselves as Caucasian so that is the label I will use.

talking about" (African American Group 17). In this quote, she does not clarify who "they" are or what type of "stuff" she is referring to although "they" seem to be ignorant (perhaps White) people and "stuff" appears to allude to serious social issues, perhaps related to discrimination and racism.

Another African American participant seemed uncomfortable with the wording of my questions. Whereas the first African American group agreed that *Chappelle's Show* presented many negative images of African Americans, a participant in a later group expressed concern with my question about what "stereotypes" are used in the program because he inferred that to be a criticism of the program. He stated, "I would say that the categories are stereotyped, but stereotypes I'm thinking you put everybody into one group." He further explained that the show doesn't stereotype because it represents several *categories* of African Americans such as pimps and businessmen (African American Group 11). I recognize in retrospect that I was likely influenced by the first African American group and had biased expectations of future African American focus groups. I was more careful with the wordings of my questions about stereotypes (asking about how various groups are "represented" and not "stereotyped") in subsequent focus groups.

Another unique dynamic was likely created in some of the focus groups that included students in my classes. Although one may expect that students would be more reserved around their own instructor with whom they must come in contact in the future, their comfort level with me (and sometimes with other students they knew from class) seemed to encourage them to be very honest with their opinions. Some exhibited prejudiced attitudes opining that White people are discriminated against more than

African Americans in our society (Caucasian Group 4). Another participant argued that Chappelle is fighting against political correctness and chastised me for using the more gentle term "pee" instead of "piss" in relation to the sketch about R. Kelly (Caucasian Group 10). Others were open about expressing their concerns that the show would encourage White racism (African American Group 9).

Overall, my role as the moderator likely influenced the communication climate of the focus groups. My race, my preconceptions about the stereotypes and potential negativity of the show, and my role as an instructor for several of the participants, seemed to have some impact on the responses of participants. Any moderator, however, will have an impact on the conversations and the positive aspect of having me as a moderator every time is that it was an element of consistency across all of the groups. I feel that conducting a large number of focus groups and complementing that analysis with quantitative measures helps ensure that this research captures a substantial depth and breadth of viewer opinions and meaning-making with *Chappelle's Show*.

Stimulus Materials

Each focus group began by viewing episode seven from season one of *Chappelle's Show*. The sketches in this episode include "Great Moments in Hook Up History," which showcases Chappelle's efforts to get a woman to have sex with him after meeting in a bar, versions of *The Matrix* and *Pretty Woman* that offer alternative endings representing what would have happened to the characters in real life, "Wu-Tang Financial," which depicts the members of the Wu-Tang Clan running their own investment firm, and "Ask a Black Dude" in which people on the street ask comedian Paul Mooney questions about racial differences. This episode was chosen because of its

representative mix of sketches addressing race, sexuality, and popular culture. This episode was also considered ideal as a stimulus material because it does not contain any particularly infamous sketches such as "Clayton Bigsby," "The Racial Draft," or the Rick James or Lil Jon impressions that may influence the participants' responses to questions about memorable sketches or stereotypes they've observed in the program. Indeed, none of the participants referenced the season one, episode seven sketches as their favorites, but the majority of the participants did laugh throughout the episode.

The purpose of the viewing was two-fold: 1) to establish rapport between interviewer and interviewees and 2) to provide a common reference point for various ideas that may be discussed (Jhally and Lewis). Jukka Törrönen also explains that stimulus texts are useful in focus groups to bring "'not now' moments and 'not here' events to the interview's 'here and now' interaction" (348). The stimulus text seemed to function well in that it provided a reference point for some responses, but it did not become the centerpiece of conversation.

Interview Structure

Following the viewing, questions proceeded from non-directive to more focused, as was the format for Morley's *Nationwide* television studies (Morley and Brunsdon 149). Although questions were not always asked in this order, the general structure of the interview went as follows: 1) How did you get started watching the show? 2a) What sketches are the most memorable to you? 2b) Why do you think those sketches were humorous? 3) Does *Chappelle's Show* remind you of any other television programs that are on or off the air? 4) How do you think the show represents different groups of people based on race and gender? 5) What do your friends and family think of the show? 6a) Do

you think there are social consequences to watching *Chappelle's Show?* 6b) Do you think the show could have a positive or negative impact on people? 7) Do you have any final thoughts about *Chappelle's Show*?

Coding

The focus groups were audio taped then transcribed for relevant data. I then analyzed the transcriptions, open coded into ten categories, and grouped the related themes into three broader categories: appeal, stereotypes, and effects. The overarching and sub-categories are organized as follows: 1) Appeal – memorable sketches and why the show is humorous, 2) Stereotypes – African American stereotypes, White stereotypes, everyone is stereotyped, truth in stereotypes, and 3) Effects – pro-social effects, discriminatory effects, just humor, and third person effects. This process loosely follows Glaser and Strauss' inductive method of grounded theory in which patterns are generated from data. As opposed to generating and testing hypotheses at the beginning of a research project, grounded theory aids in the understanding of under-explored social phenomena by producing hypotheses that emerge in the research (Glaser 5). The authors argue that grounded theory helps address the "complex *processes* of ideological inscription within individuals and collectives" (Glaser and Strauss 281, emphasis in original). Lewis advocates grounded theory as a method for uncovering how potentially hegemonic mediated messages are negotiated by media consumers, arguing that the method's interpretive approach in the formation and reformation of categories helps scholars to better understand "the interplay of experience, practice, and social structure" ("Making Sense" 287-288).

For clarity, dialogue excerpts note the race or ethnicity of the group and the number of that group (based on when the interview was conducted). The data categories and comparison of the responses both within and between races or ethnicities were used to better understand the points of relevance drawn between viewers of various subject positions and the text, which interact to create particular meaning sets from *Chappelle's Show's* own brand of racial stereotype-driven humor.

ANALYSIS

The analysis will be structured according to the three larger categories – appeal, stereotypes, and effects – that were unearthed in the open coding of the focus group transcripts. A discussion of the relationships between the participants' races/ethnicities and their interpretations of the show will be woven throughout the descriptions of the responses that comprise each category. The analysis will be reinforced by simple content analysis (noting the number of focus groups that articulated similar ideas) where appropriate.

The first category of analysis addresses the appeal of the program, initially describing which sketches were cited as the most memorable. This was one of the opening questions asked in the focus groups and helped to establish a foundation of examples for the participants to build on. By beginning with this category, I hope to provide readers with insight into the participants' preferences. The analysis will proceed inductively from the individual sketches, to the stereotypes viewers observed in the program, and on to their assumptions about potential effects of the program.

Appeal

Memorable Sketches

The most commonly cited sketches (in descending order of frequency) were "Clayton Bigsby: Blind White Supremacist" (N=15), "Rick James" (N=12), "A Night Out with Wayne Brady" (N=10), "The Racial Draft" (N=7), "The Niggar Family" (N=7), "Prince" (N=7), "R. Kelly '(I Wanna) Pee on You'" (N=6), "Lil John" (N=5), and "The Mad Real World" (N=4). Several of these sketches – "Clayton Bigsby: Blind White Supremacist," "The Racial Draft," "The Niggar Family," and "The Mad Real World" – were described and analyzed in the rhetorical analysis of Chapter 4. I will briefly describe the other frequently cited sketches in order to clarify their subject matter for readers.

Many of the most popular sketches involve parodies of African American celebrity behaviors. The Rick James sketches are part of a series called "Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories" in which comedian Charlie Murphy recounts allegedly true stories about his interactions with celebrities during the 1980s. The interactions with Rick James, which usually involve drugs, sex, and physical altercations between Murphy and James, are acted out by Chappelle (playing James) and Murphy (as himself). James also makes a cameo appearance in interviews revealing his memory of the events and also offering the adage that "cocaine's a hell of a drug." Several participants noted that these popular sketches were the reason they began watching the show: As one explained, "When I started watching the show it was when he did that Rick James episode and everybody was talking about it . . . I specially set out to watch the show" (African American Group 9).

The infamous Wayne Brady sketch plays against comedian Brady's squeaky-clean image and was created as a response to a joke made in the second season that Brady appeals to White people by "making Bryant Gumbel look like Malcolm X" (II, 5) In this follow-up sketch, Brady contradicts his spotless image by collecting money from the prostitutes he pimps, slipping Chappelle PCP, and shooting a police officer, among other crimes. According to one participant, the incongruities of Brady's real-life persona and the character he played were the most appealing: he "was acting crazy, but he was not how he is in real life" (Asian Indian Group 2).

The Prince sketch (another installment of "Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories") again presents character incongruities describing an incident in which Prince invited Murphy and his friends back to his home after meeting in a club. Contrary to expectation, Prince challenged them to a game of basketball. Prince and his femininely dressed team of "blouses" proceeded to stomp Murphy's team. After the routing, Prince again continued his unpredictable behavior with a peace offering of homemade pancakes.

The R. Kelly sketch highlights the rapper's recent legal trouble over the alleged sexual assault of a minor (for which there is rumored video evidence). In a mock video for the song "(I Wanna) Pee on You," Chappelle croons into the microphone, "Haters want to hate, lovers want to love. I don't even want none of the above, I want to piss on. Yes I do. I'll piss on you." He later douses women with his urine and smears them with his "doo doo butter." The R. Kelly sketch aired in season one and in his dialogue with the audience for season two of the show, Chappelle comments on the backlash he received from "(I Wanna) Pee on You:" "I seen R. Kelly in Chicago. He's mad at me. Ain't no punch line to that, that n----- is mad." Chappelle claims that Kelly asked him, "How you

gonna make a video about peeing on somebody?" to which he responded in kind "How *you* gonna make a video about peeing on somebody?"

Finally, the Lil Jon sketches depict rapper Lil Jon in different communication situations: interacting with an airline representative before boarding a flight, being interviewed by a reporter about his life, and having a love scene with Susan Sarandon in the fictitious movie "Lil Jon in Love." In all of the scenes he yells the key lines "OK!" and "What?!" that he has contributed to popular rap songs. He highlights the silliness of these responses, however, by switching to what one focus group participant described as "talking regularly" in parts of the conversations (African American Group 16).

The Lil Jon quotes illustrate another key feature of several of these African American entertainer parodies: They have spawned prominent catch phrases, the repetition of which likely increases their memorability. *Chappelle's Show* viewers and non-viewers alike may have heard others repeating "OK!" or "What?!" in the style of Lil Jon, saying "I'm Rick James, bitch!", or asking "Is Wayne Brady gonna have to choke a bitch?" Memorable lines such as these continue to follow Chappelle around even though he has left the show: During a stand-up performance I attended, these lines were shouted from audience members, much to Chappelle's dismay. This is a common occurrence according to an article by Pergament, which states that Chappelle is often bombarded by the lines and finds them to be distracting (C1).

There were not many discernable racial or ethnic differences regarding the focus group participants' favorite sketches. Several racial or ethnic groups contributed their votes to what ended up being the most popular sketches – except for "The Mad Real World." Two African American and two Hispanic groups both referenced "The Mad Real

World" as one that stuck out in their memories. Although no Caucasian groups cited the sketch as memorable, several referenced "The Mad Real World" in the context of illustrating the African American stereotypes in *Chappelle's Show*. An interpretation of this difference will be further developed in the stereotype section of the qualitative analysis.

Why Humorous

The memorable sketches served as a primer for the participants to then articulate what they thought makes the program funny. Asking the participants to describe the source of their amusement also represents one way to potentially tap into their interpretations of the humor, particularly if they see some of the sketches as satires or parodies. The most repeated suggestions were that 1) the program is amusing because it crosses boundaries or violates taboos surrounding racism and racial stereotypes and 2) the program is humorous because it exposes racism and racist social conditions. The latter claim, that the program is amusing because it exposes racism in society, was articulated only by African American participants, while the former was suggested by participants of all races and ethnicities who were interviewed. Whereas crossing boundaries and unearthing taboos about race relations is not necessarily pro-social, the African American groups took the progressive meanings further, describing it as exposing racism, not just violating boundaries of social acceptability.

This difference in the focus group responses suggests the applicability of "relevancy," a concept utilized by Morley in his book *Family Television* and elaborated on by Fiske, to understand viewer interpretations of *Chappelle's Show*. According to Fiske, relevance posits an active and agentic viewer who "makes meanings and pleasures

from television that are relevant to his or her social allegiances at the moment of viewing" ("Meaningful Moments" 247). Relevance or relevancy has been used in several qualitative studies, including those by Brenda Cooper and Jodi Cohen, to explain polysemic interpretations of mediated texts that are rooted in viewers' cultural subjectivities. Cooper, for example, found that "for non-African Americans, their *race* and their defense of it are relevant factors of their discourse, but for African Americans, the *racism* they personally experience is the most crucial relevancy in their film experience" (221, italics in original). Although racism was not the most crucial or only relevancy that can be identified in the African American participants' explanations for the humor of *Chappelle's Show*, it was an important and unique factor in those focus groups. And it seems that participants of other races or ethnicities were more attuned to the ways in which *Chappelle's Show* exposes political correctness, or what is acceptable to say in society, restrictions of which they may need to be more aware as non-African Americans.

The first and most commonly cited explanation for the program's humor – the taboo violations that are accomplished by repeating racist discourses – seemed to provide amusement to participants of each race and ethnicity because they were novel in their overt use of stereotypical or discriminatory discourses. One participant attempted to speak for his generation remarking that, "I think the reason a lot of people our age identify with the racial humor is that it plays on stereotypes we know not to be true but that are commonly accepted just for the sake of humor" (Asian American Group 5). A fellow focus group member built on this statement saying that this is what makes *Chappelle's Show* unique and humorous: "I think that's why it's so funny – there hasn't been anything that's so outrageous. Most people are afraid to touch on those topics"

(Asian American Group 5). These statements are potentially contradictory and confusing – if the stereotypes are known *not* to be true, how does the humor make sense to the viewers? Are the racist stereotypes represented in the show seen as "historical" by members of younger generations? Are viewers rationalizing being amused by racist discourses by saying that they don't believe the stereotypes?

A Caucasian participant said that the stereotypes make the program funny, not just because they violate the norms of social acceptability, but because the stereotypes do resonate with viewers:

> It's kind of like people like to say that there's not stereotypes between like different races but it's still like there is kind of sometimes still a difference sometimes and he just brings it out. It's just funny because it's true like some of the things. Like when he makes fun of White people or Black people how he does it is funny because you're like 'yeah that's true.' (Caucasian Group 5)

The theme that the stereotypes or the program's messages are "true" emerged in interviews with all races/ethnicities and will be revisited in more detail in the stereotypes section of the analysis.

The "taboo violation" explanation may serve different functions for various participants, but the two most common threads seem to be that they experienced shock at the norms violation and relief with the relaxation of the social boundaries. It is important to think about the persuasive results of this perceived boundary crossing. In a more troubling offering, one Caucasian participant said that *Chappelle's Show* "breaks a lot of social variables – like the word n-----, you're really afraid to say. . . but he [Chappelle] says it 100 times so it just lightens the mood" (Caucasian Group 10). If a lightened mood leads to more relaxed attitudes about racist expressions, the boundary crossing can indeed be interpreted hegemonically. On the other hand, the racist discourse may function to

clarify (through viewers experiencing shock at being exposed to the discourse), and therefore reify the boundaries of social acceptability.

African American participants also expressed pleasure in witnessing *Chappelle's Show's* stereotypical portrayals of people of various races; however, their support was context-specific. After one participant commented that "there are stereotypes, but it's like he's making fun of the stereotypes" another cautioned, "I guess it's funny to me to see a Black man do it but in a sense if I've seen for instance a White guy doing it, I would probably be offended" (African American Group 16). The previous comment suggests that stereotypical humor can be empowering or disempowering depending on not only the receiver, but the source and the context.

Other participants praised Chappelle's boldness in representing issues of particular importance to members of the African American community. One observed broadly that "being Black you can sometimes relate to what he's talking about because you understand" (African American Group 9). Another participant praised Chappelle for "dealing with social and racial issues" (African American Group 11). Others remarked specifically about racial issues in politics and racism in the media. One participant observed that the "Racial Draft" sketch raised the issue of Condoleeza Rice and Colin Powell being perceived as "sell-outs" to their race (African American Group 17) and another cited racist motives in the cancellation of *The Wayne Brady Show* that were brought out in the sketch "A Night Out with Wayne Brady" (African American Group 14).

Ten focus groups cited the "A Night Out with Wayne Brady" sketch as memorable and it is also included in the "Best of *Chappelle's Show*" DVD. Although

popular, I did not include it in the rhetorical analysis of Chapter 5 because I did not interpret to be a good example of ambivalence – Brady's character terrorizes Chappelle throughout the sketch and breaks numerous laws, seeming to conform to hegemonic African American stereotypes. Surprisingly, however, an African American focus group participant found it to be anti-racist commentary, raising the issue of discrimination in the entertainment industry – the message she inferred was that Brady would not have had all the free time to engage in the lawlessness if his highly-rated, Emmy award-winning talk show wasn't cancelled due to perceived racism on behalf of the network (African American Group 14). This counter-hegemonic interpretation never crossed my mind and therefore serves as a powerful example of the importance of audience studies to enhance and complement textual analysis.

Stereotypes

The focus groups next covered the issue of racial and gender stereotypes in *Chappelle's Show*. Gender was included to give the participants more flexibility in the discussion, but the responses will not be reported here. When questioned about the potential effects of the program, none of the focus groups referenced either positive or negative effects related to the gender stereotypes of the program, suggesting that the racial jokes are the most salient to viewers. Although several participants claimed that *Chappelle's Show* makes fun of "everyone" or people of all races (Groups 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 12) few were able to articulate stereotypes about Asians, Hispanics, or other racial and ethnic groups besides Whites and African Americans. Although there are several sketches that include stereotypes about non-Whites and non-African Americans (the infamous Pixie sketch is one such example), the majority of the program does paint the

United States in "Black and White." This section will first describe the participants' articulations of those Black and White stereotypes, then examine how the observation that the program makes fun of "everyone" was often used as justification for the stereotypes, and finally discuss the "truth" in stereotypes, a theme that emerged in the focus groups and was probed further in the paper survey.

Uptight, Upper Class Whites vs. Uninhibited, Lower Class African Americans

Interestingly, many focus group participants defined Whites and African Americans through discursively contrasting them with one another. Because of the reflection/deflection in participants' responses, both races (the participants were not able to describe many stereotypes or trends in representing other races or ethnicities) will be considered side-by-side. Many of the stereotypes that focus group participants described can be summarized with the dichotomy of uptight versus uninhibited. Many of the racial characterizations also have class connotations. Whites are described with several adjectives related to uptightness, and sometimes, an upper class association including dorky, nerdy, wussy, proper, preppy, dull, and timid. In contrast, the African American characters on the show are most often summed up as thugs, lower class, ghetto, and gangster. The White trait of uptightness is supported by several characteristics including an inability to dance (Caucasian Group 4), not being hip or in style (African American Group 9), talking very properly with little slang (Caucasian Groups 4 and 6; Asian Indian Group 12), being sexually reserved (Caucasian Group 1) and being ignorant or racist (Caucasian Group 15; African American Groups 16 and 17). Although ignorance and racism are more negative than the other characteristics, they connect with the overall assessment that Whites are portrayed as "uptight" in that the racism is attributed to a

closed-mindedness or an unwillingness to understand other cultures. The African American trait of uninhibited is also supported by several illustrative behaviors including drug use, violence, and gambling. Several non-African American groups referenced the repeat character Tyrone Biggums or crack use in general as a stereotype of African Americans (Caucasian Groups 4 and 6; Asian American Groups 5 and 7; Asian Indian Group 12). Gambling, in the form of craps or dice, was also a theme that was mentioned several times in conjunction with the African American stereotypes (Caucasian Groups 4 and 15; Asian American Groups 5 and 7; Asian Indian Group 12).

Interestingly, two of the African American characters who make repeat appearances on the show – Tron the drug dealer and Tyrone Biggums the crack addict – were considered representative of African American stereotypes by non-African American focus groups. Several non-African American groups also referenced (or their responses seemed to be inspired by) characters from "The Mad Real World" or "Reparations 2003" – sketches that were introduced by Chappelle with serious social commentary about racism on *The Real World* and about the connection between slavery, affirmative action, and reparations. Focus group participants recalled that the crime rate went down to zero in the reparations sketch (indicating that all crime is perpetrated by poor African Americans [Caucasian Group 4]), that the White character's father was stabbed by the African American characters in "The Mad Real World" (Caucasian Group 6, Asian American Group 7, Hispanic Group 3), and that an African American ex-convict slept with the White man's girlfriend on "The Mad Real World" (Asian Indian Group 12). Because these points were most salient to several participants, it seems as if these viewers did not interpret the sketches as the stereotype parodies that Chappelle claims

they were intended to be in his introductions to the sketches. Several participants referenced the sketches when asked about racial representation, but no one cited them as pro-social learning tools when considering the potential effects of the program. Their responses seem shaped by historically rooted racist stereotypes about African American crime, violence, and sexual virility.

Whereas the non-African American focus groups generally pointed out particular characters or character behaviors that they believed illustrated the stereotypes, the African American groups tended to use generalizations when identifying the stereotypes, preferring phrases such as "lower class," "hood perspective," "thug mentality" (African American Group 9), "ghetto or gangster" (African American Group 16), and "not educated" (African American Group 17) in their descriptions. The stereotypes for them did not seem to be rooted so much in threatening or violent actions, but in nuances regarding behavior, mannerisms, and other indicators of class and social position. One participant remarked, for example, that Chappelle uses the reversal of stereotypes as a comic strategy, citing examples in which Lil Jon talks "regularly" (instead of saying his simplistic catch phrases) as a source of humor (African American Group 16). Another noted that the Wayne Brady sketch plays on the idea that "Black people who are more successful than other African Americans seem more White or 'Whitewashed'" (African American Group 14). Whatever Brady has done to craft a career or public persona that makes "Bryant Gumbel look like Malcolm X," he is not seen as "authentically" African American.

Brady is seen as an "inauthentic" African American for being "successful," and his dissociation from traditional African American representation indicates that

Whiteness is associated with being upper class. This association emerged in several of the focus groups through the language that Whites are "professional and hard working" (African American Group 9), "the family's all perfect" (Caucasian Group 6), and "White kids were spoiled, better off, rich" (Asian Indian Group 12). One Asian American participant guessed that White viewers would react poorly to being stereotyped in this way:

> I think they [Whites] would kind of take offense to it because they are being seen as so uptight with so much money. That they would probably take offense that they have advantages over everybody how they're always seen as higher than everybody else. (Asian American Group 7)

This comment provides a useful transition to the issue of the valence of the stereotypes. Although it is entirely possible that a White person would take offense to the stereotype of being privileged, the African American stereotypes depicted in the program seem much more negative in comparison, for they reify a subaltern hierarchy. After Chappelle fled to Africa due to concerns about the reception of the show, the "Lost Episodes" were aired and stand-in hosts Charlie Murphy and Donnell Rawlings interviewed members of the studio audience about their thoughts on the program's portrayals of race. The interviews were conducted after the studio audience had viewed the "Pixie Sketch," which had allegedly inspired Chappelle's flight. Many of the themes that arose in the focus groups for this project were echoed in the responses of the studio audience members, including the question about the valence of the stereotypes. For example, an African American woman remarked,

> I feel like it's derogatory to Black and Spanish people but it plays on the good stereotypes of White people. Even though there's a pixie for the White people it plays on that they're educated and that, you know, they listen to rock music, but

> that's not bad. But to play on we like chicken and we like shukkin' and jiving. (III, 2)

Another African American audience member supported her initial interpretation observing that "the White race is seen as more like the generic race so it doesn't really affect them as much – so the fall out's going to be more on us, the Hispanics . . . (III, 2). A White member of the studio audience disagreed, observing that "it's not a crime to eat fried chicken – it's not a bad stereotype." The divergence in these comments cannot be attributed only to the audience members' races, but also to the related experience of facing discrimination as a member of a marginalized group. Note that as the White audience member remarked that eating fried chicken is not a negative stereotype, he failed to comment on the issue of "shukkin' and jiving" in the African American pixie portrayal.

Stereotyping Everyone

Although participants could think of few stereotypes other than those for African Americans or Whites, at least one person in seven of the focus groups maintained that *Chappelle's Show* makes fun of "everyone." These comments often emerged after I asked what they perceived to be the racial representation or stereotypes of the show. While many mentioned negative stereotypes prevalent in the show, they defended *Chappelle's Show* with comments such as "obviously the characters are stereotypical I guess, but I feel he does that to everybody" (Asian Indian Group 2) and "[the characters] are not biased against anybody in particular" (Hispanic Group 8). Another participant claimed by "attacking every stereotype," *Chappelle's Show* becomes less controversial or less likely to offend viewers (Caucasian Group 6). These comments were echoed by the studio audience who weighed in on the potential effects of the pixie sketch. An African

American woman noted, “I think he touched on four different races and everybody should just be easy. It was funny as hell . . . it’s not that deep.” Similar sentiments were expressed a few moments later by another African American woman: “Everyone was touched. So I think it was a variety so that made it funny and not just Black people always feeling like the joke is going to be about me” (III, 2). One focus group participant interpreted this egalitarian approach as an intentional marketing strategy: “That’s probably something [Chappelle] worries about – that he’s making fun too much of one group or the other. In his perspective, he wants to reach out of the largest audience he can” (Asian American Group 7).

Many participants also claimed that Chappelle’s willingness to make fun of African Americans functions as a sign that he has good intentions with the comedy. They claimed, “he makes fun of everybody. He’ll make fun of himself” (Asian Indian Group 2), “as much shit as he talks about every other race, he does of his own race” (Caucasian Group 4), and “he’s making fun of himself, which is for one thing showing that he’s OK with uncomfortable subjects” (Asian Indian Group 12). This final comment about “making fun of himself” suggests that Chappelle serves as a model for how to interpret the stereotypical humor and that, as an African American, his acceptance of the humor (given that he is the one producing it) indicates to some viewers that they should not take offense to the stereotypes. Throughout these comments that relate to “stereotyping everyone,” we see many focus group participants and studio audience members make attributions about Chappelle’s intentions, indicating that they put thought into what his goals are with the program and also that they take cues from his on-air persona. Collectively, this theme in the viewers’ responses provides support for Freud’s theory

that the joke teller is an important feature in determining if an audience will be amused by tendentious jokes (*Jokes* 110).

Selective reception also seems to be a factor in the attributions the audience members make to the source of the humor. Chappelle left the show (because of concerns about the reception of African American stereotypes) prior to the studio audience interviews and prior to some of my focus groups, yet no viewers who were interviewed (by me or by the substitute hosts Charlie Murphy and Donnell Rawlings) utilized Chappelle's worries as an indication of potentially negative effects of the show. To be sure, some viewers thought the show could potentially perpetuate racism, but no one referenced Chappelle's concerns in support of their hegemonic interpretation: his presence and opinions were only referenced in support of progressive interpretations of the program's effects. It seems that viewers make polysemic interpretations about Chappelle's persona and opinions, selecting only certain elements to support their pre-existing opinions of the program.

Chappelle's Show Tells the "Truth"

The final theme that emerged in the stereotype cluster of the data is that the program presents the "truth." This theme that *Chappelle's Show* presents the truth or that the show resonates with the participants' realities emerged in 11 of the focus groups. The most obvious trend with respect to the race or ethnicity of the focus group members was that it was stated in all of the African American groups. I was initially unsure of how to interpret this comment as the focus group participants could have intended various meanings with the statement: For example, they could mean that the stereotypes themselves are true or that it is true that people harbor the stereotypes. Because of my

uncertainty and the ineffectiveness of trying to probe the focus group participants on what they meant by "truth," I asked survey respondents to explain why a sketch was funny and coded their responses for the word "truth" (and related terms such as "true" and "reality") in their explanations. After discussing the focus groups' responses, I will then describe the survey findings.

Based on contextual details, it does seem that several of the focus group participants meant that the stereotypes themselves are true. For example, a Caucasian participant noted:

> [P]eople like to say that there's not stereotypes between like different races but it's still like there is kind of sometimes still a difference sometimes and he just brings it out. It's just funny because it's true like some of the things. Like when he makes fun of White people or Black people how he does it is funny because you're like "yeah, that's true." (Group 4)

"The Mad Real World" surfaced again in the discussion of "true" stereotypes with an Asian Indian participant arguing that "*The Real World* – it's so true like by the third day or something, they [the African American roommates] [. . .] were all playing cards and he [the White roommate] was trying to go to sleep" (Group 12). This last example is perhaps the most egregious in demonstrating that the "truth" refers to the stereotypes themselves:

> [T]he truth is there's always some truth to every stereotype and so I wonder if Dave Chappelle [. . .] intentionally puts these stereotypes out there. Black people are his audience and they're going to learn from it and say 'we are being made fun of' and [. . .] they're laughing they're having a good time but it kind of switches on a trigger that says 'I'm not going to be labeled like the lazy-Kool-Aid-drinking-sitting-at-home-not-doing-anything-working-for-McDonalds guy. I'm going to go get a career and go to school and get an education.' (Asian Indian Group 12)

By suggesting that all of the negative stereotypes about African Americans are true and that the potential positive effect is that they will not try to conform to those stereotypes,

this participant's comment suggests that the perceptions of "truth" in *Chappelle's Show* may reify discriminatory stereotypes in the minds of some viewers.

It was also common for participants to express agreement with the show's message or to note that it resonated with the way they think, but without specifying what particular message or representation of reality they agreed with. At least one person from all of the African American groups said something similar to "what he is talking about is true" and one elaborated that "he [Chappelle] just gets Black people in general" (Group 14). It seems that, in some of their opinions, the show accurately captures unique elements of African American culture. However, other racial and ethnic groups noted that *Chappelle's Show's* themes resonated with them as well.

Many participants agreed that the show often presents an accurate depiction of reality, but observed that they would not feel comfortable expressing this "reality" as Chappelle does. For example, a Hispanic participant stated,

> I think you can relate to some things. Not maybe to every sketch but you know at some point you're like 'yeah, I know what he's talking about' or you know 'I was thinking that the whole time,' but you can't say it so you know it's good to just watch it and laugh so it's like 'well it's not me saying those things.' (Group 8).

This theme hearkens back to the discussion of why various people find the show funny, providing additional support that *Chappelle's Show* offers viewers relief from the pressure to express "politically correct" sentiments. One African American participant admitted to feeling this pressure as well, stating "A lot of the stuff he says . . . That's exactly how I feel, but I shouldn't, I don't want to say it. You just think it and move on and he actually says it and gets a laugh saying it" (Group 17).

The vast majority of the focus group responses did *not* seem to take the stance that the "truth" of *Chappelle's Show* is that it represents the reality that people use stereotypes to discriminate: On the contrary, most seemed to be saying that the program reinforces the accuracy of the stereotypes themselves. The information gleaned from the survey data, however, suggests otherwise. Participants in the paper survey viewed one of two sketches: The first sketch was a parody of the Miss Cleo psychic hotline and used stereotypes to predict the future, while the second sketch depicted people of several different races and ethnicities sitting on a plane and expressing their stereotypical fears about one another.[7] After viewing one of the two sketches, participants were asked to rate how humorous they found the sketch to be and to explain their humor ratings. Their qualitative written explanations were then coded for the presence of the word "stereotype" and the opinion that the sketch represents the truth. Whereas 74% (N = 71) of participants referenced "stereotypes" in their discussion of why the Miss Cleo sketch was humorous, only 59% (N = 38) of participants used the word "stereotypes" in their discussion of the humor of the plane sketch. Participants were equally as likely to describe the sketches as "true" or representative of "reality" (22% [N = 22] for the Miss Cleo sketch and 23% [N = 15] for the Plane sketch). In other words, the racist stereotypes represented in Miss Cleo and *acts of* using stereotypes to discriminate in the Plane sketch were seen as equally representative of reality. Collectively, these findings indicate that there is not a strong connection between stereotypes portrayed in the sketches and "truth" evaluations of the sketches.

[7] The sketches are described in more detail and the full survey results are reported in Chapter 6.

While the paper survey and the presence of the terms "stereotypes" and "truth" do not present definitive answers to how viewers interpret the content of *Chappelle's Show* and its relationship to their reality, the combination of survey and focus group responses enriches our understanding of viewers' interactions with the text. Collectively, these findings suggest that *Chappelle's Show* can function either to reify perceptions that people do use stereotypes to discriminate against one another or the perceptions that the stereotypes themselves or accurate. The divergent views of *Chappelle's Show's* "truth" or "reality" seem to be dependant upon individual viewers and the stereotypical content of the sketches.

Effects

The participants' articulations of what makes the program funny, less so than their description of the stereotypes, seemed to inform their judgments of the potential social effects that the program may have. Although many of the focus groups described negative African American stereotypes that are represented in the show, the majority of participants offered that the show likely has a positive effect on viewers. These expressions of optimism seem more consistent with participants' explanations for why Chappelle's Show is funny: it violates racial and social taboos and it exposes racism and discrimination. Interestingly, only non-White participants spoke of potential negative consequences of the show.

Another schematic incongruity can be seen in the common response that the program is "just comedy" and has no effects on the audience, but that it could have a negative effect if viewed by young people or people who are ignorant of diversity. Social desirability and perhaps guilt about discrimination likely played a role in these responses

and opinions. Viewers seemed unwilling to admit that the show could have negative consequences on people *like them* and often focused on the positive portrayals in the show or brushed it off as "just comedy." This section will first begin with a discussion of the responses that the show has positive or pro-social effects, then move on to the few descriptions of the potential negative consequences. Finally, I will discuss the divergent themes that the program is "just comedy" (and therefore doesn't have any effects on the audience) and the speculation that the program may have third-person effects, influencing people other than the focus group participants.

Pro-Social Effects

Participants were most likely to hypothesize about potential positive effects from the show. The major reasons they used to explain their interpretations were that 1. the show helps people to "loosen up" regarding serious social issues, which may sometimes lead to serious conversations about racial differences, 2. the show exaggerates stereotypes to the point of making them seem ridiculous, and 3. the show presents serious issues of racism and discrimination.

Helping people loosen up or making light of serious issues was the most prevalent reason behind *Chappelle's Show's* surmised pro-social effects, particularly for non-African American viewers. For example, one participant said that it "breaks the ice because he makes it comfortable for everybody to listen to" (Caucasian Group 15), while another noted that it "eases tension" (Caucasian Group 4). Another agreed that the jokes "make everyone lighten up" (Asian American Group 5). Many saw the program as a conversation starter and an area of common ground among diverse people.

Due in part to the conversational window of opportunity provided by the show, some participants even claimed that they were able to engage in open dialogues with their friends or relational partners. One participant made the general observation that Chappelle "puts it out there [and] it becomes almost like something we talk about: 'Did you watch *Chappelle's Show*? Did you hear what he said about . . . " (Asian Indian Group 12). A Caucasian focus group participant noted that the show encouraged her and her friends to share "more serious aspects of [their] backgrounds" (Group 10). Two participants were more specific in their assessment of *Chappelle's Show's* encouragement of interracial dialogue. Referencing an interracial relationship she was in during college, a participant agreed that the show was an outlet for the challenges she and her partner faced: "just watching the *Chappelle's Show* was kind of like a kickback for us to be like 'ah ha ha they're making fun of your race' and we'd joke about it back and forth (Asian Indian Group 12). An African American participant made a similar observation, saying:

> I think it brings people together, races together. [The show is] something that everybody can talk about. It eases you to bring some issues up. . . It makes you feel easy around people. It also gives you an understanding about the way of how they feel. (African American Group 11)

With this comment, the focus group participant brings together all of these issues of easing tension, providing fertile ground for conversation, and fostering understanding or perspective-taking.

Although *Chappelle's Show's* ability to make light of serious issues was often seen as a positive feature by the participants, it is also possible that promoting a more light-hearted view could function hegemonically. The following comment was meant in praise of the show, but the implications are problematic:

> I think maybe like more than anything most of the time he's like making fun of these issues [. . .]. [H]e takes on some serious issues and kind of just portrays how ridiculous [they are]. [For example], with the whole Kobe Bryant skit – the consensual sex agreement – It's just [. . .] showing how it's just a little bit ridiculous and how everybody just needs to loosen up a little. (Asian American Group 7)

The sketch referenced in this comment originally aired in episode four of season two and involves Chappelle asking a woman to sign a consensual sex agreement. Although the sketch does exaggerate the measures one must take to ensure that sex is consensual, the focus group participant seemed to interpret the sketch in a manner that trivializes the seriousness of rape and sexual assault. Similarly another participant noted that the sketches "bring up racial issues but they make you think about it in a different way. They get you thinking about it not so seriously" (Asian American Group 7). If, as these participants claim, *Chappelle's Show* brings up serious issues, but only as a vehicle for entertainment that discourages social change, the purported counter-hegemonic functions are ideologically and politically empty.

A different area of support for a pro-social interpretation did not seem to contain implicit racist reasoning. Several focus groups, representing almost all of the races and ethnicities that participated, produced the claim that *Chappelle's Show* is a positive social force through its exaggeration (and therefore satire) of stereotypes. An Asian American participant stated, "I think actually the way he portrays things, like how extreme and ridiculous it is. I think if you had those stereotypes, I think you would be sitting there thinking 'oh wait this is a little ridiculous. Maybe it's not really like this'" (Group 7).

When pressed to explain what she meant about the "truth" of the show, an African American participant elaborated with the example that Asian students at her college are

often stereotyped as being a valedictorian of their high school, but that she really tries "not to say those [stereotypes] or act in that sense, because you watch the show and even though it's funny, it's still a stereotype that everybody thinks of when they look at you" (Group 16). From this example, it seems that at least one person was inspired to change her behaviors and the way she interacts with others based on the program's exposure of stereotypes.

The exaggeration of stereotypes may encourage viewers to rethink their beliefs, and this Caucasian participant also thought that it enhances the humor of the show:

> I think he grossly overemphasizes all of the stereotypes and that's why he's so funny. It's because he plays off of the things that everybody knows and he just makes them way over the top. In a way I think it just kind of proves how stupid all of the stereotypes are. (Caucasian Group 6)

But according to one Hispanic participant, the positive effects come from the comic context that is dissociated from reality: "It could show people who actually think that Black people are violent and crazy like how ridiculous that is. Because it's on a comedy show it's obviously not true" (Hispanic Group 3). For this participant, it seems that nothing on a comedy show should be taken at face value: The content should instead be considered a satire or parody of reality. Exposure to these exaggerated stereotypes, argued one African American participant, "is basically [positive] because it kind of makes people in general aware of the stereotypes these days" (Group 16)

The most concretely counter-hegemonic observation was that *Chappelle's Show* raises awareness about racism in society, thereby educating viewers. African American respondents in two separate focus groups claimed that the show raises awareness about social and racial issues (Groups 11 and 17). One participant elaborated, citing the "Blind

White Supremacist" sketch for sending the message that "there's an environment of hatred. It does show you how stupid hate is [and] it broadens and enlightens" (African American Group 11). A Hispanic participant drew the same conclusion about the entire show, arguing that "I think [Chappelle is] making a point through the whole show that racism is stupid" (Hispanic Group 8) and a Caucasian participant concurred that the show "educates people about different issues" related to race (Group 4).

As with many of the focus group findings, these comments resonated with the interviews of studio audience members that aired in season three. An African American man explained that he feels uncomfortable when his White co-workers seem to purposely use slang around him. He elaborated that the comedy can function as

> a relaxed way for other people to look at other races and see how people communicate. Because if I told them I get upset it's like the angry Black guy, but if you watch Dave Chappelle, you see the sketch and you are like "now you know how I feel." I feel like when we get out you don't need to say "what up shorty." (III, 2)

This man's hypothesis about *Chappelle's Show's* effects is in line with Kenneth Burke's theory of the comic frame: In this example, he sees the show as a gentle corrective to social problems – one that invites the comic clown to change their behavior.

Because several viewers stated that people may learn about racism and better understand the experiences of African American from the show, I included a uses and gratifications measure on the paper survey. Only people who watched *Chappelle's Show* occasionally, weekly, or more than once a week were asked to check any of the reasons why they watch the program (N = 74). The eight options were: 1. to laugh, 2. to escape from life, 3. to be able to participate in conversations about the show, 4. to gain a new perspective on the world, 5. to kill time, 6. to not think for a while, 7. to spend time with

friends/family, and 8. to learn/be informed about the world. The *most* selected options by far were to laugh (N=71), to spend time with friends/family (N=37), to kill time (N=36), and to be able to participate in conversations about the show (N=33). Based on these responses, it seems that many viewers *intentionally* use the show for entertainment and as a means of socializing with others. The *least* selected options were to gain a new perspective on the world (N=11) and to learn/be informed about he world (N=2).[8] These findings suggest that few viewers are actively using *Chappelle's Show* as a source of understanding about people of various races and ethnicities. Although the survey participants were unlikely to admit to seeking knowledge from the show, these findings do not rule out any understanding or knowledge they could have unconsciously gained.

Discriminatory Effects

Although the focus group participants were most likely to praise *Chappelle's Show* as a program that is enlightening about racial differences and racism, several non-Caucasians were concerned that the show could perpetuate discrimination. These comments fell into three main categories: 1. the show reinforces stereotypes, 2. the show makes people less hesitant to use the N word, and 3. the show encourages viewers to make stereotypical jokes.

The four African American participants in focus group 9 concurred that *Chappelle's Show* may reinforce negative African American stereotypes, particularly for people who have little exposure to African Americans in their everyday lives. A participant in a separate African American focus group agreed that the show may further

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8 Survey fatigue could have encouraged the participants to check the first boxes as opposed to the latter boxes, however, the 7th option was one of the most popular.

stereotypes and noted that several of her African American friends get upset by African American stereotypes depicted on the show – such as having an affinity for fried chicken. Although several members of the *Chappelle's Show* studio audience argued that this is an innocuous stereotype (in the third season interviews), any stereotypical assumptions about food choice or other seemingly mundane issues can be taken as an affront by those about whom the stereotypes are made.

The N word is also a sensitive subject that was referenced in several groups. As one participant claimed, when the show "throw[s] the N word around a lot – some people are maybe not quick to use it, but aren't as hesitant to use it" (African American Group 9). Building on this response, another participant in the same group complained that "The Niggar Family" sketch made her uncomfortable: "that one was just like 'ok, that's funny,' but he just kept saying it [the N word]. I felt kind of weird" (African American Group 9). An Asian American participant who had African American friends recounted an incident in which his African American friends argued with Caucasian strangers over the appropriateness of a *Chappelle's Show* quote:

> People feel that just because it's on the media and because a famous person is saying it that they have the rights to go out there and expect people not to get offended by it, but that's really not the case. . . A White individual said "the n----- tried to kill my father" [quoting a Chappelle sketch] . . . and my friends turned around and started . . . saying stuff like 'that's bullshit' and 'you shouldn't be saying stuff like that in public.' (Asian American Group 5)

In this incident, it seems that the lines of the show possibly encouraged the boundaries of social acceptability to blur for a few viewers – a norm transgression which led to social conflict.

Based on some of the focus group participants' statements, some did find the N word to be more acceptable in contemporary society. The following Caucasian participant adopted that view: "'The Nigger Family' [is] the single greatest sketch ever. . . just because that was broadcast on public television – I think it's leaps and bounds for trying to ignore the social bans that we put on words" (Caucasian Group 10). Although he focuses on general "social bans" in this comment (ignoring the historically situated racism attached to the N word), the participant later explained that he thought the sketch took power away from a derogatory term: "where I'm from if you use that word, you say that, then you're trying to hurt somebody. When you have it shown in that perspective, it just totally changes what the word means" (Caucasian Group 10).

Others argued that the N word has lost some of its negative meaning (whether the show encouraged them to think that way is impossible to judge from this data). For example, a participant offered this opinion: **"**Now it [the N word] no longer means something as bad. It might still be bad, but just like slightly bad. It's almost like if you say it more then it really doesn't mean the same thing anymore. It isn't really as bad" (Asian Indian Group 12). Throughout this quote, we see that the participant often hedged himself, perhaps indicating that he was not fully comfortable about expressing this view to the group. Another Hispanic participant said that he uses the N word, but argued that there are differences in one's usage: "There's a strong difference – if it's like an 'er' (n---er) and an 'a' (n---a). I'm not Black as you can tell, but I use it. It (n---a) doesn't mean anything. It's like 'homie'" (Hispanic Group 8). After other members of his focus group stated they would never use the word, the participant then conceded that he would be very careful about saying n---a in mixed company: "If I had African American people

around me, I wouldn't feel comfortable saying the 'a' at the end. It's a tricky distinction to make" (Hispanic Group 8). Again, it's impossible to determine from the focus group responses if the show encourages viewers to use the N word more freely. Although some non-African American participants stated that it is acceptable to use the term, judging by their hedging, they seemed to still recognize that the N word (however it is pronounced) still has the power to hurt and offend.

An Asian Indian participant was similarly concerned that the show would encourage viewers to say things that are socially unacceptable (by her standards). She thought that *Chappelle's Show* viewers would be more likely to use the N word, and also that they would be more likely to make jokes about other races in general (Asian Indian Group 12). An African American woman in the studio audience described this as a problem for her as well:

> Sometimes it makes people a little too comfortable where they shouldn't be comfortable. Where they hear some of these jokes, like if they talk about the big butt jokes and you know a White person turns around and says 'yeah you've got a badonkadonk.' They make funny jokes like that that they might hear on the show. It's funny to hear Dave Chappelle do it but I don't want to go to the office and hear you guys making some of these funny racist jokes. (III, 2)

Many of these concerns about the potential hegemonic functions of the sketches gesture toward the ambivalence of racial-stereotype driven humor: Several of the focus group participants were concerned that some viewers would not interpret the stereotypes as parodies, but as reality. Similarly, others participants were rightly concerned (based on their personal experiences) that viewers would model *Chappelle's Show's* jokes or character behaviors, leading to enhanced racial discord. While using humor to ease

tension can have positive effects, there may be pro-social outcomes of keeping people uncomfortable and wary of offending others.

Just Humor, but Third-Person Effects

While many participants weighed in on the positive or negative social consequences of *Chappelle's Show,* others dismissed it as "just comedy" or "just humor," arguing that the non-serious context negates any persuasiveness of the show. People representing all races and ethnicities that were interviewed adopted this stance. This theme is exemplified in several comments including "anybody watching the show knows that [Chappelle is] just not being serious [and] won't get offended by it" (Asian American Group 5). Others specifically mentioned the potentially offensive racial dynamics on the show in comments such as, "Basically it's a comedy show and no I don't take the race issue to heart" (Caucasian Group 15) and "We don't think about the racial slurs. It's there, you don't take offense. Whatever Dave Chappelle says you don't take it to heart" (Asian Indian Group 12). Whereas Chappelle gets a free pass to say anything by the previously quoted participant, someone else thought that any jokes on *Chappelle's Show* (or perhaps any comedy show) should also be shielded from criticism: "You can make fun of anything about our society or our people because it's a comedy show" (Caucasian Group 6). Findings from focus groups conducted with *Rush Hour 2* viewers support this observation that many viewers of various races and ethnicities are likely to dismiss stereotype-driven jokes that are made in the context of a comedic film or television show (Park et al. 166). These coordinated findings strongly suggest that the "just humor" defense is a widespread viewer response to avoiding considering the potentially serious consequences of racial stereotype-driven films and television shows.

There is a difference, however, between dismissing the show as "just comedy" and considering it a satire that mocks the shortcomings of society and spars with hegemony. In order for *Chappelle's Show* to be considered a progressive example of the African American Signifying tradition, viewers (at least some viewers) need to interpret the program as an assault on the dominant culture, as a text that creates a productive rhetorical space for questioning the existing social hierarchy. Whereas some of the viewers' interpretations of the program can be considered satirical – for example, participants said that various sketches exaggerate stereotypes and expose their ridiculousness or that some sketches involve social commentary on racism – those who claim that it is "just humor" undermine the seriousness of the social commentary. Although this participant describes the show as a satire, her interpretation of what a satire is only seems to involve negating potentially discriminatory effects, not making a progressive social statement: "He [Chappelle] just kind of makes everything a satire so it's not really offensive" (African American Group 16).

Indeed, several focus group participants professed a dislike for the comedy of Chris Rock because they perceived him to be too "political." These participants' comments comparing the comedy of Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle represent a productive window of insight into the polysemy of *Chappelle's Show* and its social value. Rock's comedy is interpreted as to be more serious and seems to be less polysemic than *Chappelle's Show*. According to several focus group participants, *Chappelle's Show* does not guide viewers toward confronting inequalities or racial prejudices, instead it can be viewed solely as entertainment that is stripped of social commentary. *Chappelle's Show*, in sum, seems more palatable to a diverse audience (that may not want to confront racism

or their own prejudices) because it can be taken non-seriously. Consider the following comments comparing the two comedians' work:

> I like Chris rock, but he kind of takes himself a tad more seriously than Chappelle does. (Caucasian Group 1)
>
> I think that Chappelle has the ability to say 'I'm here. I'm going to say what I want to say. I don't take myself seriously, you shouldn't either.' It's funnier. (Caucasian Group 1)
>
> He [Rock] talks more about serious stuff. Dave Chappelle just talks about regular everyday subjects. (Hispanic Group 3)
>
> Chris Rock always acts like he's serious. (Caucasian Group 6).
>
> [Chris Rock is] mad all the time. (Caucasian Group 6)
>
> I think [Chappelle's] approach is unique. It's not so much controversial as unique because he's attacking every stereotype. Whereas, like, they're talking about Chris Rock – it seems like he just attacks one angle of it. Dave Chappelle kind of comes at it from both sides, from a White person's perspective and a Black person's perspective and takes both stereotypes to the opposite extremes. It's just funny that these attitudes prevail in society. (Caucasian Group 6)
>
> [Chris Rock is] always pissed off, he's always got something. Like Chappelle he makes fun of the situation, Chris Rock is more like 'I'm oppressed. I hate everybody including Black people.' He hates everybody. (Caucasian Group 6)
>
> I think yeah Dave Chappelle, he's just making fun of everything. Chris rock takes it more serious. He's taking a stand. (Asian American Group 7).
>
> Dave Chappelle he doesn't really cross the line of taking it past just entertainment where with Chris Rock you kind of feel like he's more political. (Asian American Group 7)

These responses from non-African American focus groups indicate that many viewers are able to take pleasure from the type of comedy that Chappelle creates, but not the more

"angry" comedy of Chris Rock.[9] Being able to dissociate Chappelle's Show from seriousness, and avoiding confronting issues of racial inequality, seems to be animportant component to their amusement. It seems unlikely that viewers in a non-serious mind-set will engage in a counter-hegemonic reading of the program – or if they do make a counter-hegemonic reading, that they will not be amused by the text.

Although many of the participants claimed that they and their like-minded peers were impervious to the ideological effects of the comedy, several worried about the effects the show may have on kids and young adults, or people who only associate with others of the their own race or ethnicity. Many people do not like to admit that *they* may be influenced by media and this may explain the prevalence of the third-person effect, defined as the perception that a "message will have a stronger impact on others than on the self" (Perloff 490). The similarity between these populations that several focus group participants worried might take the show the "wrong way" – kids and ignorant people – is that they would misunderstand the satire and/or fail to understand that it is inappropriate to repeat the jokes from the show in real-life contexts. Clearly, the focus group participants thought that they had a good handle on what is socially acceptable:

> The only negative I could see is just younger generations that aren't intelligent enough to grasp all these different types of things. We're all college students. I think we have a good idea of racism, what's correct, and what to call people. (Asian American Group 5)

> We're old enough to watch it and know that he's making a joke out of something that is actually kind of serious. If young kids watch it they're not necessarily

[9] Interestingly, the only African American group that discussed Rock's comedy described him as "Whitewashed" because he has more commercial exposure and is perceived as catering to a White audience (African American Group 9).

> going to understand that it's OK for him to get up there and make a joke out of it. (Caucasian Group 4).
>
> I know a lot of friends' younger siblings in high school that are big fans of the show. But they probably don't interpret it the same way we do. (Asian Indian Group 2)

Other people did not specifically cite young folks as the viewers most susceptible to learning prejudice from the show, but opined that the show could be dangerous for anyone who is ignorant about diversity. As one participant explained,

> If you don't hear the other side of the story then you're not going to have a counter argument to it. So if you came from a little bubble and watched this it maybe would kind of implement some stereotypes into you – because you didn't see how it really was. It would be kind of like 'oh they really are like that' and I think it would sway your views on things. (Asian American Group 7)

This issue was also at the forefront of a studio audience member's mind during the third season interviews:

> Obviously all the sketches are funny. It's funny that we can come together and laugh at each other like that. But I think the problem lies in the ignorant people at home or possibly in here. The problem comes in when people base their opinions on these jokes. (III, 2)

These worries about third-person effects underscore the importance of exploring the ways in which *Chappelle's Show* may shape or reinforce viewers' perceptions of various races and "reality" in general.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has discussed the findings of 18 small group interviews with college-age *Chappelle's Show* viewers. The data was coded into three overarching themes related to the appeal, stereotypes, and potential effects of *Chappelle's Show***.** In the appeal category, I described the "most memorable" sketches cited by the participants and

discussed their explanations for why they find the program and those particular sketches to be humorous. The most commonly cited reasons the focus group participants found the show to be humorous are that it 1) crosses social boundaries or taboos surrounding racism and racial stereotypes and 2) exposes racism and racist social conditions. The issue of racism and discriminatory social conditions seemed most relevant to African American focus group participants for they were the only group who cited that as a reason for their enjoyment of the show.

The second category, labeled "stereotypes" included four sub-categories: African American stereotypes, White stereotypes, everyone is stereotyped, and there is truth in stereotypes. Within this section, African American stereotypes and White stereotypes were considered in opposition to one another, with African Americans most often described as lower class, thuggish, and gangster and Whites most frequently described as with adjectives proper, dull, and timid. There was arguably a more negative valence to the African American stereotypes, however, non-African American focus group participants and members of the *Chappelle's Show* audience who were interviewed did not interpret the stereotypes as such. A blindness to the differences in the stereotypes is perhaps related to the next sub-category – everyone is stereotyped – which seemed to be used as an excuse or justification for the program's stereotypical content. Finally, several participants of each different race or ethnicity said that *Chappelle's Show* presents the truth or represents reality. These observations could be interpreted in several different ways such as the stereotypes themselves are true or that it is true that people hold those stereotypes. Although some of the focus group discourse seemed to indicate that people found the *stereotypes themselves* to be true, the addition of a survey measure suggested

that viewers were also thinking that the *presence of stereotypical attitudes and discrimination* was true.

Finally, the potential effects of *Chappelle's Show* were considered, with the majority of focus group participants describing pro-social or neutral effects of the program. The most commonly cited claims to support the pro-social stance were that the show helps people loosen up about serious social issues, that it exaggerates stereotypes to the point of ridiculousness, and that it presents serious issues of discrimination. Many participants, however, dismissed any suggestion of the program's effects arguing that it is a non-serious form of entertainment. Very few participants, including no Caucasians, worried that *Chappelle's Show* could function to perpetuate discrimination. And for those participants who did describe hegemonic effects, many thought that young people and ignorant people would be most susceptible to that influence. Those who articulated potentially hegemonic effects were most concerned that the program would reinforce stereotypes, discourage people from censoring their use of the N word, or encourage people to make offensive stereotypical jokes.

Several competing tensions may be distilled from this analysis of the coding categories and sub-categories. First, whereas many groups described negative African American stereotypes portrayed in the show, the majority described only positive effects of the program. Racism and issues of racial differences seemed to be a salient feature to many of the African American viewers interviewed. Guilt over racially based privilege or concerns about appearing to be racist seemed relevant to non-African Americans and Caucasians in particular. No Caucasian participants were willing to describe potentially negative effects of the program and their silence potentially signals a fear that they would

be considered prejudiced for enjoying the program. A similar area of tension can be seen in the claims that the program can have no effects (for it is just humorous entertainment), but that there may be third-person effects. Viewers were most likely to consider themselves immune to any negative effects of the program, perhaps due again to the guilt that may emerge if one believes they are watching a show that promotes prejudice. It was much easier for participants to imagine negative effects on viewers who were different from themselves (either by being younger or less socially aware).

A second overarching and very serious tension can be seen within the theme of boundary crossing or taboo violation. Numerous participants stated that *Chappelle's Show* was humorous and/or a positive social force because it encourages viewers to relax about serious issues through its violation of social norms. Many also described *Chappelle's Show's* focus on controversial issues or its efforts to engage topics in controversial ways as a unique feature of the program, compared to the rest of television content. While addressing controversial issues and taboo subjects may be positive, several participants seemed to suggest that society should be more "relaxed" about serious issues such as racial discrimination and sexual assault. It seems that some focus group participants took *Chappelle's Show* as a cue that social change is unwarranted and people should be content with society as is.

The final tension I will discuss is unique to the African American focus group participants. Racism, racial stereotypes, and the portrayal of unique African American experiences seemed highly relevant to them overall. That is not to say that all African American participants expressed the same sentiments or that these issues were not on non-African Americans' radars – I had several participants, many of whom claimed to

have close African American friends, who were very aware of the show's potential to reinforce prejudice or that it may be interpreted as a positive site for the enhanced visibility of issues that are particularly important to the African American community. On the whole, however, the African American participants seemed more aware of the potential negative consequences of the program, but also of the positive ways in that the content of the show that more closely relates to their unique life experiences. For most of the viewers that I interviewed, the positives of the show seemed to outweigh the negatives, for they remained viewers.

This tension is illustrative of the ways in which the qualitative analysis adds greatly to my textual analysis in Chapter 4. As I mentioned previously, I did not read any potential counter-hegemonic meanings in the Wayne Brady sketch; however, an African American participant interpreted it to be a critique of Hollywood racism. I would also never have guessed that quoting the show could lead to an altercation between strangers (Asian American Group 5), that some African Americans would say that Chappelle understands and represents unique aspects of their lives (African American Group 14), that the show demonstrates "how mixing different races won't work" (Asian American Group 7), or that an interracial couple would use the show to forge a stronger bond in the face of external social pressure (Asian Indian Group 12). Collectively, these focus group findings add much insight into the process by which viewers use their personal experiences to extract relevant meanings from the content of *Chappelle's Show*.

Chapter 6: *Statistical Measures of Viewer Characteristics and the Relationship Between* Chappelle's Show *Viewing and Prejudice*

The use of survey methods and statistical analysis in cultural studies work is undoubtedly controversial. In his 1997 article titled "What Counts in Cultural Studies," Justin Lewis offers that "cultural studies saw survey methods as empiricist and 'laboratory' style experimentation as both empiricist and ahistorical" (85). Protesting this entrenched aversion to quantitative methods, Lewis argues that surveys can indeed be used as discursive tools to map socially constructed meanings (96), proffering not only the benefit of enriching our own research, but also providing the opportunity to flex our deconstructivist muscles by learning to "speak" the language that "the dominant culture takes most seriously" (87).

Rhetorical scholars, most notably Celeste Condit and Edward Schiappa have incorporated quantitative surveys as part of their multi-methodological approaches to various social phenomena (see for example Condit, Bates, Galloway, Givens, Haynie, Jordan, Stables, and West; Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes). In their 2002 examination of the uses and interpretations of polysemic metaphors, Condit et al. found that each of their research methods (including textual analysis, focus groups, and semantic scales) revealed "distinctively different views of the metaphoric processes" (322). In a different study, Ramsey, Achter, and Condit claimed that a strength of written surveys is that they minimize socially desirable responses, compared to the social pressures participants feel when part of focus groups (6). As such, the quantitative and qualitative studies in this

dissertation should provide a nice complement to one another (see also Jensen 34). It is my hope that survey information addressing *Chappelle's Show* viewing behaviors, uses and gratifications, liking, and humor evaluations, as well as quantitative analyses of interactions between the show's content and viewer prejudices will provide another dimension of data that will ultimately enhance the overall analysis.

The information presented in this chapter makes several unique contributions to the collective case study. First, although *Chappelle's Show* was (and continues to be) widely viewed, there is no available data on the needs viewers are seeking to fill with the program (i.e. entertainment, social learning, escapism), the relationship between race/ethnicity and viewing or liking the program, and other basic measures. Throughout the process of completing this project, I have been unable to find any published essays on *Chappelle's Show* (from any methodological perspective) in the communication field, or other humanities or social science disciplines. Information on viewer demographics was also not available. With no other publications to draw from, this dissertation must create its own groundwork on the program. It is important to fill the gap in our understanding of viewers and viewing motivations, and I have already referenced some of my findings on viewers' uses and gratifications to supplement Chapter Five's qualitative analysis. The quantitative data will address viewer characteristics more in-depth and will incorporate both explicit and implicit measures of prejudice.

A second contribution this chapter makes to the overall project is that it introduces a new angle from which to understand humor appreciation and the effectivity of humorous texts – the unconscious. As Freud argued at the turn of the 20th century, the unconscious can be a very powerful force affecting humor appreciation. Indeed, the

unconscious is a focal point in several media effects theories and many studies are designed to tap attitudes and effects of which the research participants are unaware. The unconscious has not gone unnoticed by communication scholars: For example, in their article touting the importance of conducting audience research, Stromer-Galley and Schiappa offer that the textual analysis and audience studies can yield conflicting results because the texts may have "affected audiences in ways in which they are unaware" (49). Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin's study of racial stereotypes in the comedy *Rush Hour 2* also illustrates the importance of the unconscious. The authors' textual analysis resulted in hegemonic conclusions about the stereotypical nature of the comedy, yet their focus group participants (of several races/ethnicities) found the film entertaining, funny, and inoffensive (170-171). Although the focus group participants took pleasure in the film, Park et al. were "skeptical of the disruptive potential of race-based comedy" because "minority participants' pleasure did not transcend but occurred *within* the discursive confines of the racial ideology" (174). In this situation, unconscious measures of viewer prejudice may have added another piece of support to mediate between the disparate conclusions of the authors' textual analysis and their focus group participants' self-reports.

The quantitative study presented here can help add to the conversation begun with my textual analysis of the program and my critical interpretation of the focus group discourse, offering more insight into the conscious and unconscious attitudes primed by *Chappelle's Show*. Before discussing the findings of the studies, I will briefly survey related literature on the effects of exposure to stereotypes.

EFFECTS OF EXPOSURE TO STEREOTYPES AND STEREOTYPICAL HUMOR

The majority of research assessing the influence of stereotypical portrayals on social cognition indicates that exposure to stereotypes results in more negative evaluations of members of an out-group. Many studies on stereotypes utilize a prime – a word, an image, a text, or other stimulus – to activate the mental construct of the stereotype in study participants. Numerous studies have been conducted on stereotype priming related to gender and race, and several of their findings will be described here. The studies consulted have used a variety of stereotype stimuli, not limited only to humorous mediated texts (as is the focus of my study). The findings are relevant to this project, however, in that effects seen after priming stereotypical traits through words or images should be similar to the effects seen after people are exposed to stereotypical mediated comedic images. As this dissertation is concerned with the meanings viewers make with stereotypical texts and how exposure to those stereotypes may affect the viewers' future judgments toward others, the research on stereotypes and social cognition is extremely relevant.

Even if those who tell racist or sexist jokes claim to not believe in the stereotypes that they have uttered, studies by Maio, Olson, and Bush, and Hobden and Olson indicate that just telling stereotypical jokes may increase negative affect toward an out-group. Maio et al., found that reciting disparaging humor about Canadian Newfoundlanders led participants to rate Newfoundlanders more negatively on stereotypical traits (1996). These findings partially replicate Hobden and Olson's findings that reciting disparaging jokes about lawyers led to reports of more negative attitudes toward lawyers (246-247).

While telling stereotypical jokes is a more active cognitive process, passively viewing stereotypical mediated images or being exposed to stereotypical humor also appears to be positively correlated with harboring stereotypical views. In his study involving a stereotypical and neutral comedy sketch featuring African Americans, Ford found that White participants who were exposed to the stereotypical prime were "more likely to make negative judgments of an African American target person" ("African Americans" 271). Ford suggests that his results are indicative of a unique effect of humor and stereotypes in that humor muddies the social norms that define acceptable behavior, thereby cultivating conditions in which discrimination is not readily censored ("African Americans" 272).

Ford's study on the effects of sexist humor and the tolerance of sexist events also presents many fascinating findings that expand understanding of stereotype-based humor and attitudes. Ford found that participants who rated high in hostile sexism had increased tolerance for sexist incidents after being exposed to a vignette involving sexist humor ("Sexist Humor" 1100). These findings add further support to Ford's assertion that humor relaxes social norms ("African Americans" 272). Another variable in Ford's sexist humor study is particularly relevant to our understanding of race-based humor and minor discourse on *Chappelle's Show*'s: those who rated high in hostile sexism were also more tolerant of sexist incidents when the joke teller was female, suggesting that there are more harmful effects of disparaging jokes that are told by members of the disparaged groups (1104).

Both research teams Banaji, Hardin, and Rothman, as well as Johnson, Adams, Hall, and Ashburn, conducted studies that involved an even simpler prime of

stereotypical attributes. In their study on gender, Banaji et al. drew from the stereotypical feminine or masculine traits of "dependence" and "aggression," respectively, finding that participants were more likely to attribute the gender stereotyped characteristics to target persons following exposure just to the two words (276). The words "dependence" and "aggression" had no effects, however, on interpretations of the cross-gender target person, indicating that the stereotype prime works only for pre-existing categories associated with each gender. Johnson et al. examined correlations between exposure to violent stimuli and attribution of the behavior of White and Black defendants. The authors' findings revealed that after exposure to violent stimuli, participants attributed the behavior of Black defendants (in a separate case) to dispositional factors more so than external or situational variables (86). The dichotomy of dispositional vs. situational attribution is an indication of a stereotypical mindset in that dispositional violence is seen as an innate characteristic (thus resonating with a negative stereotype of African Americans) in contrast to situational violence, which is seen as a product of unique circumstances and not "blamed" solely on the defendant. Even when primed by a non-race specific violent stimuli and simple words, the accessibility of stereotypes was more prevalent in both studies.

The effects of stereotype priming are of course not uniform and many external variables likely interact with their effects. Mastro and Tropp conducted research in this vein, investigating the relationship between prejudice, interracial contact, and evaluations of both stereotypical and non-stereotypical Black sitcom characters. The authors found that prejudice and interracial contact are both influential regarding participants' interpretations of Black characters, but that interracial contact was not enough to override

prejudice as a predictor of negatively evaluating Black characters (126). Further, the authors found that Black characters in stereotypical portrayals were rated lower in competence and social skills (124). Similar to selective perception theory, these findings suggest that pre-existing racial views are integral to the maintenance of stereotypical schema when prejudiced viewers are primed by humorous mediated images.

While the collective sum of images on television undoubtedly perpetuates negative stereotypes of minorities and women, several studies have indicated that positive results may occur if viewers are exposed to more positive representations that are counter-stereotypical. For example, in Power, Murphy, and Coover's study assessing the effects of stereotypic and counter-stereotypic primes on Caucasian participants' judgments of Rodney King's videotaped beating and Magic Johnson's announcement of his HIV status, the authors found that participants who were exposed to the stereotypical portrayal were more likely to blame King and Johnson for their plights (47). Opposingly, those who were exposed to counter-stereotypic portrayals were more likely to attribute King and Johnson's troubles to external or situational factors (not blaming it on the men's personal actions or behaviors). Citing research that demonstrates a link between stereotyping and internal or external attributions, this study indicates that the counter-stereotypical primes reduced participants' subsequent use of stereotypical schema.

In sum, these studies on prejudice and viewing have yielded mixed findings. Exposure to counter-stereotypical portrayals has been found, in some cases, to reduce participants' applications of stereotypical race and gender schema. However, entrenched schematic stereotypes or existing prejudices readily emerge when study participants are

asked to make evaluations of people of various races or genders after being exposed to stereotypical stimuli, including words, jokes, and mediated images.

The Present Studies

Study 1 explores the relationship between participants' race/ethnicity and their liking and watching of *Chappelle's Show*, among other variables. The argument that I make throughout this dissertation is that stereotype-driven humor is notably polysemic, appealing to people of various subject positions. If this claim is true, then *Chappelle's Show* should have the same level of appeal to people of various subject positions and various belief sets (in other words, the null hypothesis should be strongly rejected). To that end, I have formulated hypotheses 1 through 4:

H1: Participants' race/ethnicity will be highly unrelated to the frequency of viewing *Chappelle's Show.*

H2: Participants' race/ethnicity will be highly unrelated to liking *Chappelle's Show.*

H3: Participants' levels of prejudice will be highly unrelated to viewing *Chappelle's Show.*

H4: Participants' levels of prejudice will be highly unrelated to liking *Chappelle's Show.*

The next hypotheses relate to the effects viewing *Chappelle's Show* may have on participants' levels of prejudice. The first study involved paper survey data collected from four treatment groups with a 2 (sketch 1/sketch 2) x 2 (attitude measures before/after viewing sketch) factorial design. The attitude measures in the first study were

a combination of the Modern Racism Scale (MRS) and questions asked after participants finish the Implicit Association Test (IAT).

Study 2 utilized the Implicit Attitudes Test to collect data from four treatment groups who viewed one of three sketches from *Chappelle's Show* or brief clip from *The Cosby Show* as a counter-stereotypical comparison. The IAT was designed as an attitude measure that removes the self-presentation biases that commonly influence explicit survey measures. The IAT accomplishes this by timing the participant's association between a concept or image and a positive or negative adjective. There are several versions of the IAT and one utilized here is titled "Race IAT." In this computerized test, participants are asked to sort images of African Americans and European Americans in designated ways by pressing the "e" or "i" keys on their keyboard. The participants are also asked to sort positive and negative adjectives such as joy, love, wonderful, and happy or agony, terrible, awful, or failure using either the "e" or "i" key. In the words of Dr. Anthony Greenwald, "The IAT produces measures derived from latencies of responses to these two tasks. These measures are interpreted in terms of association strengths by assuming that subjects respond more rapidly when the concept and attribute mapped onto the same response are strongly associated" (Greenwald Website). The test is available online at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/ and that is how participants in this study accessed the test. The data is also analyzed online through the Harvard website and results are reported instantly. Several studies have provided detailed support for the reliability and validity of the IAT (see, for example, Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz; Wittenbrink, Judd, and Park). In this study, the IAT will not be used to assess the

participant's levels of prejudice, but to better understand the attitudes that are primed by *Chappelle's Show.*

Given that stereotypical portrayals should result in higher levels of conscious and unconscious prejudice and counter-stereotypical portrayals should have the opposite effects, I have formulated the following hypotheses for the conscious (Study 1 – MRS and IAT survey measures) and unconscious (Study 2 – IAT computer test) attitude measures:

H5: Survey measures comprised of MRS and IAT questions will be significantly impacted by the sketch such that those who view the more stereotypical sketch will report higher measures of prejudice compared to those who viewed the sketch that can be interpreted as a satire of stereotypes.

H6: IAT measures of unconscious racial preference will be impacted by the television vignettes so that there will be a significant difference between the cell frequencies in each of the five conditions.

H7: IAT measures of unconscious racial preference will be impacted by the television vignettes such that those who view *The Cosby Show* will report lower levels of White preference compared to those who view *Chappelle's Show*.

STUDY 1

Participants

One hundred and sixty undergraduate students (111 female, 43 male, 6 other) from a large Southwestern university participated in this study in exchange for extra credit in their introductory communication classes. In response to the open-ended

question of racial/ethnic identification, 95 of the participants identified as White (59.4%), 32 as Hispanic (20%), 18 as Asian (11.3%), nine as African American (5.6%), one as Indian (.6%), and one as Pakistani (.6%). A total of four participants (2.6%) wrote "other" or left a blank.

Experimental Procedures

Potential participants were told that the purpose of the study was to understand comedy appreciation, and that in order to participate they would need to attend one of four sessions. Participants randomly selected one of four treatment conditions. All participants began by filling out a paper survey asking them about demographic information, general television viewing, and viewing/liking of several comedy programs (*South Park, Two and a Half Men, Chappelle's Show, The Daily Show,* and *The Office*). Half of the participants (two treatment conditions) then filled out the attitude measures (questions from the MRS and IAT questions with responses on a 5-point Likert scale – one indicating strongly disagree and five strongly agree). Those two groups were then shown a *Chappelle's Show* sketch and asked to finish the questionnaire, which involved describing and evaluating the humor of the sketch. The other half of the participants (two total treatment conditions) answered several MRS and IAT questions before watching the sketch, and answered two more after watching the sketch, describing and evaluating the humor. The four separate conditions can be summarized as follows:

Table 6.1

Four Treatment Conditions in Study 1

Group 1: Sketch 1 (Plane Sketch), MRS and IAT questions administered *before* viewing sketch	**Group 2:** Sketch 1 (Plane Sketch), Several MRS and IAT questions administered *before* viewing and two *after* viewing sketch
Group 3: Sketch 2 (Miss Cleo sketch), MRS and IAT questions administered *before* viewing sketch	**Group 4:** Sketch 2 (Miss Cleo sketch), Several MRS and IAT questions administered *before* viewing and two *after* viewing sketch

The two questions that were asked either before or after participants viewed the sketch were: "Even today, racial discrimination significantly limits the employment opportunities of many blacks in America" (from MRS) and "Cab drivers in big cities who occasionally choose to pass by a black person seeking a cab ride, then pick up a nearby White American person, have a reasonable justification for doing this" (from IAT follow-up questionnaire). The 5-point Likert scale ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The answers to these and the other questions were assigned values, with lower numbers corresponding to lower levels of prejudice (several questions were reverse coded). The numbers were then summed to yield an aggregate score of prejudice.

Stimuli

The first sketch parodies "Miss Cleo's" psychic hotline with "Dave Chappelle's Educated Guess Line" in which Chappelle is a phone psychic who used racial stereotypes to predict people's futures. As the announcer claims, "Dave Chappelle is not a psychic. He is merely a racist who believes that stereotypes dictate our futures" (I, 2). The sketch builds on negative stereotypes of African Americans and Latinos. In the sketch,

Chappelle fields a call from an African American man who is in jail and predicts that the man will be released, but will go right back to jail for committing the same crimes. Chappelle also figures out that another caller is Mexican just by asking if he drives a pick-up truck (yes), if he has insurance (no), and if his name is Miguel (yes).

The second sketch is more balanced in that it illustrates prejudices held both *by* and *about* Arabs, African Americans, Whites, and Native Americans. The sketch opens with two Arabs sitting on a plane and heatedly arguing. The sub-titles reveal that they are upset about the results of the *American Idol* competition. A voice-over reveals that the two African Americans seated behind them are thinking, "I've got my eye on you Al Qaeda" (I, 5). The White man seated behind the African Americans thinks to himself, "What are those negroes doing in first class? Must be rappers – I'd better keep my eye on Sarah [presumably his daughter seated next to him]." In the next row are two Native Americans, one of whom thinks to himself, "better not go to bathroom – White men will steal my seat and call it manifest destiny." The buffalo seated behind them, however, remark in jealousy, "at least you got casinos." The sketch closes with Chappelle and co-writer Neal Brennan asleep on the plane with *The Daily Truth* newspaper and headline "America United" resting on Chappelle's lap. This ironic closing potentially signals a more serious tone to viewers.

Humor ratings for the two sketches were not statistically different. The mean for the Miss Cleo sketch was 3.95 on a 5-point scale (SD = .8) and the Plane sketch was 4.08 (SD = .762). And consistent with the intended uses of the two sketches, 74% (N = 71) of participants referenced "stereotypes" in their discussion of why the Miss Cleo sketch was humorous, while only 59% (N = 38) of participants used the word "stereotypes" in their

discussion of the humor of the plane sketch. These findings tentatively indicate that Miss Cleo focuses more on stereotypical portrayals, not on satirizing stereotypes.

Results Study 1

Study one explored the relationship between the participants' race/ethnicity (H1, H2) and prejudice (H3, H4) to their liking or viewing of *Chappelle's Show,* as well as the potential effects viewing a *Chappelle's Show* sketch may have on participants' responses to survey questions related to prejudice (H5). As predicted in H1 and H2, the mean scores for viewing *Chappelle's Show* (M = 2.38, SD = 1.05) and liking *Chappelle's Show* (M = 3.85, SD = .985) did not differ significantly based on the participants' race or ethnicity. The one-way ANOVA showed F to be highly insignificant: F (6, 151) = .430; p<.858, η = .486 for "Watching *Chappelle's Show*" and F (6, 149) = .123; p <.993, η = .125 for "Liking *Chappelle's Show.*"

Relative prejudice levels were measured by taking the sum of participants' responses to the MRS and IAT questions (M = 24.22, SD = 5.04). These results indicate that the program does not appeal to a homogeneous audience, but instead offers amusement to people of various races and ethnicities. These findings confirmed H3 and H4. The one-way ANOVA showed F to be highly insignificant for both viewing and liking: F (24, 157) = .732; p < .811 for "Watching *Chappelle's Show*" and F (24, 155) = .541; p < .959 for "Liking *Chappelle's Show.*" These results indicate that regardless of race/ethnicity and prejudice levels, many participants find appealing elements in *Chappelle's Show.* These results offer quantitative support that the text is highly polysemic: People of different subject positions and attitudes did not differ significantly

in their liking or watching of the show so it is likely that there is an openness to the text that viewers make use of in different ways.

The data, however, did not confirm H5. There were no significant differences found when comparing the scores from attitude measures (the two questions about employment discrimination and cab discrimination) that were administered either before or after viewing a sketch (Pre/Post Plane or Pre/Post Cleo). There were also no significant differences between attitude measures taken after participants viewed one of the two different sketches (Plane/Cleo). The results of the series of independent *t* tests are as follows:

Table 6.2

Study 1 Results of *t* Test Comparison of Mean Aggregate Attitude Measures (Q10 + Q11).

Participants	**Pre/Post Plane**	**Pre/Post Cleo**	**Plane/Cleo**
All participants	t (62) = .440 P < .661	T (94) = .425 P < .672	t (80) = .814 p < .418
If Whites, Hispanics, and Asians selected	t (56) = 1.089 P < .281	T (85) = .954 P < .343	t (71) = .263 p < .793
If females selected	t (42) = .291 P < .773	T (65) = -.216 P < .830	t (63) = .077 p < .938

It is interesting to note that the variance between the attitude measures completed after viewing the Plane sketch and after viewing the Miss Cleo sketch were less significant than those comparing the groups who watched the same sketch, but completed the attitude measures at different times. This may perhaps indicate that the salient features in the sketches that related to racial prejudice were not all that different to the viewers.

Selecting only females did not have a productive impact on the significance levels (females only were isolated because they participated in the study at much higher levels than males), but selecting only Whites, Hispanics, and Asians did increase the significance levels for the pre and post measures for the individual sketches. These races/ethnicities were isolated because the questionnaire asks about prejudice toward African Americans and so the responses of African Americans would likely skew the findings. These three races/ethnicities were chosen because they participated in the greatest numbers. In future studies, it is advisable to recruit a larger number of participants of many races/ethnicities and equal numbers of men and women in order to see the impact of such a sample on the significance levels.

The means of the attitude measures taken either before or after viewing also were not in the predicted direction. The means are as follows:

Table 6.3

Study 1 Mean of Aggregate Scores Q10 + Q11 Per Condition

Condition	**Mean of Aggregate Scores (Q 10 + Q 11)**
Plane sketch, questions administered *before* viewing	4.78
Plane sketch, questions administered *after* viewing	4.62
Miss Cleo sketch, questions administered *before* viewing	4.50
Miss Cleo sketch, questions administered *after* viewing	4.38

Remembering that lower numbers correspond to lower levels of prejudice, it seems that after watching the sketches, participants reported lower levels of prejudice. Breaking down the results question by question, yields different trends, however.

For question number ten, "Even today, racial discrimination significantly limits the employment opportunities of many blacks in America," the means were as follows:

Table 6.4

Study 1 Mean Scores for Q10

Condition	**Mean Score**
Plane sketch, questions administered *before* viewing	2.5
Plane sketch, questions administered *after* viewing	2.66
Miss Cleo sketch, questions administered *before* viewing	2.74
Miss Cleo sketch, questions administered *after* viewing	2.48

These findings also run counter to H5 because prejudice actually appeared to increase after viewing the Plane sketch and decreased after viewing the Miss Cleo sketch. It was predicted that the Plane sketch's satire of stereotypes would reduce prejudice, compared to the more openly stereotypical Miss Cleo sketch. Perhaps the reason for this difference is that the Miss Cleo sketch's more brazen look at stereotypes emphasizes to viewers that prejudices are present in society, and that they may impact the employment opportunities of African Americans. On the Plane sketch, many different groups are discriminated against, perhaps sending the message that there is a level playing field with regard to employment opportunities. Although there were differences between the means, the *t*

tests comparing the means again were not at significant levels. The difference in the means of the Pre/Post Cleo measures approached significance, but not beyond the .05 level. The data can be summarized as follows:

Table 6.5

Study 1 Results of *t* Test Comparison of Means Q10

Participants	**Pre/Post Plane**	**Pre/Post Cleo**	**Plane/Cleo**
All participants	t (62) = -.619 p < .538	t (94) = 1.33 P < .186	t (80) = .800 p < .426

For question number 11 "Cab drivers in big cities who occasionally choose to pass by a black person seeking a cab ride, then pick up a nearby White American person, have a reasonable justification for doing this," the relationship between the means was reversed. The data are summarized as follows:

Table 6.6

Study 1 Mean Scores for Q11

Condition	**Mean Score**
Plane sketch, questions administered *before* viewing	2.28
Plane sketch, questions administered *after* viewing	1.97
Miss Cleo sketch, questions administered *before* viewing	1.76
Miss Cleo sketch, questions administered *after* viewing	1.90

With this question, the Plane sketch showed a greater drop in prejudice levels, whereas the Miss Cleo sketch resulted in an increase. A potential explanation for this trend is that the Miss Cleo sketch may be interpreted as making a more general statement about discrimination and stereotypes, whereas the Plane sketch may have made the issue of discrimination in transportation more salient to viewers, showing them that prejudices do affect various racial and ethnic groups' access to transportation. Although the Pre/Post Plane sketch measures approached significance, none of the findings were significant beyond the .05 level. The results are summarized below:

Table 6.7

Study 1 Results of *t* Test Comparison of Means Q11

Participants	**Pre/Post Plane**	**Pre/Post Cleo**	**Plane/Cleo**
All participants	t (62) = 1.299 p < .199	t (94) = -.734 p < .465	t (80) = .331 p < .742

In sum, interesting trends emerged between the mean scores of various treatment groups. The differences in participants' responses to individual questions were particularly interesting and seemed related to the specific content of the sketch they viewed. However, there were no significant differences between the means.

STUDY 2

Participants

One hundred and fifty-eight undergraduate students (104 female, 52 male, 2 other) from a large Southwestern university participated in this study in exchange for

extra credit in their introductory communication classes. Sixty-seven of the participants identified as White (42.4%), 38 as Asian/Asian American (24.1%), 27 as Latina/o (17.1%), 14 as African American (8.9%), five as multi-ethnic/multi-racial (3.2%), four as Indian (2.5%), and two as Middle Eastern (1.3%). One participant left the question blank.

Experimental Procedures

Study 2 was designed to test H6 and H7, which state that there will be a significant difference in the IAT result frequencies among the various conditions (H6) and that those who viewed the *Chappelle's Show* sketches will have higher levels of White prejudice compared to those who viewed a clip from *The Cosby Show* (H7). Because the IAT measures unconscious levels of prejudice (and knowing about the focus of the study should not change their responses), students were told directly that the study was related to television viewing and prejudice. Students randomly selected one of four treatment groups. Each group was treated the same, but watched one of three comedy sketches or a sitcom clip: Plane sketch, Mad Real World, Two Legal, or Cosby Show sketch. Students filled out one page of demographic information that included their age, gender, year in school, and amount of television viewing they generally engage in. They were then instructed to pause and wait for the brief video to begin. After watching a sketch or Cosby clip, students were asked to describe the video in a few sentences. They were then directed to laptop computers positioned throughout the room and followed instructions to access the IAT online. After students completed the Race IAT, they were given one of eight results: "Strong automatic preference for White people compared to Black people," "Moderate automatic preference for White people compared to Black

people," "Slight automatic preference for White people compared to Black people," "Little to no automatic preference for White people compared to Black people," "Slight automatic preference for Black people compared to White people," "Moderate automatic preference for Black people compared to White people," "Strong automatic preference for Black people compared to White people," and "No result because of too many errors." The results were assigned numbers 1-8 (in order). Those with no result (coded as 8) were not included in the analysis.

Stimuli

The four separate stimuli included three *Chappelle's Show* sketches, and one clip from *The Cosby Show* as a counter-stereotypic comparison. The "Plane" sketch from Study 1 was used again here, and two other sketches from the rhetorical criticism chapter were also selected – "The Mad Real World" and "Two Legal Systems." As a reminder, the "Plane" sketch depicts people of different races, ethnicities, and species, sitting on an airplane and expressing their prejudiced attitudes toward those seated in front of them. "The Mad Real World" is a spoof of the race relations of MTV's reality program *The Real World.* "The Mad Real World" builds on the racial conflict of *The Real World,* attempting to turn the tables and creating a house in which a lone White man lives with "six of the craziest Black people." "Two Legal Systems" features an enactment of how White white collar criminal Charles Jeffries and African American drug dealer Tron Carter would be treated if the justice system underwent a racial reversal in discrimination.

The special edition of *Law and Order* that follows shows law enforcement treating Jefferies unfairly and using excessive violence and, in contrast, being very

lenient and accommodating to Carter. *The Cosby Show* clip is from season one of the program and it depicts patriarch Cliff Huxtable engaging in a discussion with daughter Vanessa about the importance of fulfilling her commitment to practice the clarinet and participate in an upcoming music recital. Power, Murphy, and Coover (1996) have argued that *The Cosby Show* is the television program containing counter-stereotypic African American characters that has received the greatest amount of research attention (38) and the clip was intended to provide a contrast from the potentially stereotypical portrayals of African Americans on *Chappelle's Show.*

Results Study 2

The nominal data gathered in study two were analyzed with the Pearson's Chi-Square test of association. The frequencies are as follows:

Table 6.8

Study 2 IAT Result Frequencies by Stimulus Condition

Result	**Plane**	**Reparations**	**Cosby**	**Two Legal**
1 (Strong automatic preference for White people)	8	13	14	13
2 (Moderate automatic preference for White people)	17	9	15	13
3 (Slight automatic preference for White people)	4	8	5	4
4 (Little to no automatic preference for White people)	3	4	6	3
5 (Slight automatic preference for Black people)	1	2	0	1
6 (Moderate automatic preference for Black people)	3	2	3	4
7 (Strong automatic preference for Black people)	1	0	0	1

Because the Chi-square test of independence is not an appropriate statistical measure if 20% or more of the cells have a frequency of less than five, I grouped the data into larger categories. Category I is the sum of frequencies for "Strong automatic preference for White people" and "Moderate automatic preference for White people" because those are more extreme measures of White preference. Category II is the sum of frequencies for "Slight automatic preference for White people," "Little to no automatic preference for White people," and "Slight automatic preference for Black people" because those are middle-ground measures. And Category III is the sum of frequencies for "Strong automatic preference for Black people," and "Moderate automatic preference for Black people" because those measures represent another polar extreme. The re-calculated frequencies are as follows:

Table 6.9

Study 2 IAT Result Frequencies by Stimulus Condition – Grouped into Larger Categories

Result Categories	**Plane**	**Reparations**	**Cosby**	**Two Legal**	**IAT Avg.**
I: Strong plus Moderate preference for White people	25	22	29	26	22
II: Slight preference for White, little to no preference, Slight preference for Black	8	14	11	7	13
III: Moderate preference for Black, Strong preference for Black	4	2	3	5	3

Because Category III still resulted in low frequencies, it was left out of the analysis and only I and II were compared. The results did not confirm H6 or H7. The association between all of the conditions was: $x^2 = 2.621$; $df = 3$; $p < .454$. When the four different video clip conditions were compared and only non-African American participants were

selected, the significance increased, but not to the 95% confidence level: $x^2 = 5.067$, df = 3; $p < .167$. The frequencies for only non-African American participants are as follows:

Table 6.9

Study 2 IAT Result Frequencies by Stimulus Condition (Grouped into Larger Categories), Selecting only Non-African Americans

Result Categories	**Plane**	**Reparations**	**Cosby**	**Two Legal**
I: Strong plus Moderate preference for White people	24	21	29	23
II: Slight preference for White, little to no preference, Slight preference for Black	5	14	10	6

Although H7 predicted that participants who viewed *The Cosby Show* clip would have lower levels of White preference, the frequencies for that condition were not much different than the Plane sketch and Two Legal sketch conditions. Surprisingly, the Reparations sketch, which showcases many negative African American stereotypes, seemed to result in more moderate White preference (i.e. less prejudice against African Americans) compared to the other three conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to our understanding of *Chappelle's Show's* appeal and its interaction with viewer prejudices. H1 and H2, which state that the participants' races/ethnicities would be highly unrelated to their viewing and liking of *Chappelle's Show,* were supported from the analysis of data. H3 and H4 were also supported demonstrating that prejudice also does not have a significant relationship with viewing and liking *Chappelle's Show.* These findings provide quantitative support for John Fiske's claim that "all television texts must, in order to be popular, contain within them

unresolved contradictions that the viewer can exploit in order to find within them structural similarities to his or her own social relations and identity" (392). *Chappelle's Show* has been a remarkably popular program, breaking DVD sale records for television shows (Becker 32). And even though it is a show that highlights stereotypes and differences, race/ethnicity and prejudice did not significantly interact with viewing and liking – p values for all those measures approached one.

The hypotheses in this study that predicted exposure to stereotypical comedic portrayals of African Americans would be related to higher levels of conscious and unconscious prejudice were not supported. Although H5, H6, and H7 were not confirmed, interesting data trends emerged. In Study 1, it was predicted that the Plane sketch would result in lower levels of prejudice and that the Miss Cleo sketch would result in higher levels of prejudice due to the way in which they portrayed stereotypes (as either a satire of stereotypes and prejudice or a validation of stereotypes and prejudice). However, the groups that completed survey measures of prejudice *after* viewing either sketch demonstrated lower average levels of prejudice than those who completed the measures *before* viewing a sketch.

When analyzing survey questions 10 and 11 separately (which were administered either before viewing or after viewing a sketch), it seems that the context of each sketch may have had an impact on the participants' responses. For the Plane sketch, which showcased a myriad of stereotypes against various groups in the setting of an airplane, participants were less likely to agree that discrimination limits African Americans' economic opportunities, but more likely to agree that it is wrong for cab drivers to discriminate against African Americans. Perhaps the balanced portrayal of stereotypes

against various groups made it seem like everyone is discriminated against in society and although discrimination is wrong (based on responses to the cab driver question), prejudice does not affect the economic opportunities of one group more than another. With regard to the Miss Cleo sketch, participants were more likely to agree that prejudice limits African Americans' employment opportunities, but were also more likely to agree that it is acceptable for cab drivers to discriminate against African American passengers. Based on these results, an interesting area of further exploration would be to tailor survey questions directly to the subject matter of the sketches. For example, questions could be tailored to the Reparations 2003 sketch that assessed participants' evaluations of slavery reparations or African Americans' economic behaviors.

In Study 2, there were also no significant findings – the frequencies of the seven IAT results were remarkably similar among those who viewed the Plane sketch, Reparations 2003, Two Legal Systems, and even *The Cosby Show* clip. Significance levels did improve, however, when only non-African American participants were selected. The results also suggest that not only was H7 disconfirmed, but that the opposite effect may be happening – that the highly stereotypical Reparations 2003 sketch may have resulted in *less* prejudice against African Americans. Future studies should explore this phenomenon more in-depth. In the next paragraphs, I will discuss areas for improvement with regard to sampling and methodology. Collectively, several changes to the research design could improve upon the current studies and yield significant results with regard to the trends that emerged here.

One concern about the study might stem from the limitations of the sample. The participants were all college students, and although *Chappelle's Show* seems to strongly

appeal to their demographic, they may have a unique interaction with the program compared to people of other ages. Viewers who participated in focus groups registered a concern for how younger people and those from non-diverse communities would interpret the stereotypical content of the program. Viewers without less intergroup contact than college students may have a stronger reaction to the stereotypical portrayals in the program.

There were also several methodological limitations of both studies that could have potentially contributed to the support of the null hypothesis for different survey measures. First, participants were not give pre and post test measures, but were compared to different populations. The differences in the populations likely led to more variance. In future studies, it would be advisable to administer the conscious measures of prejudice questionnaire to each participant *before* viewing and again *after* viewing the stimulus text, then to analyze the variance within subjects. This may not be advisable with the IAT unconscious measures of prejudice because participants' practice with the computer test could alter their results. However, it would be interesting to see if the results were more significant than the between subjects measures found here.

A second methodological change that may have altered the significance of the findings would be to expose the participants to more of a stimulus. Viewing more than just a few minutes of a stereotypical comedy clip may have resulted in a greater impact on the participants' attitudes. Watching a full episode would have more closely mimicked a real viewing experience, for viewers are unlikely to watch just one sketch and then tune out from the program.

A third methodological limitation may have been the selection of the stimulus texts. The researcher speculated that the Plane sketch and Miss Cleo sketch differed with regard to their satirical quality, but the participants may not have interpreted the stimulus texts in the same manner. In the future it would be advisable to conduct a pilot test that asks for participants' ratings of the satirical quality of the texts, or even to include measures of satirical quality in the study itself.

Limitations notwithstanding, the current studies have interesting implications and expand scholars' understanding of viewing motivations and potential effects of exposure to the programs' stereotypical content. The direction of the results revealed that some sketches encouraged particular types of prejudice and others seemed to reduce prejudice. These variables should be explored more in-depth to evaluate the potential effects of *Chappelle's Show* and other stereotype-based mediated comedic texts on general levels of prejudice and also attitudes related to specific content in the shows, such as slavery reparations, discrimination in the media industry, the use of the N word, and other prominent themes. Contrary to the expected findings, these results suggest that *Chappelle's Show* and similar texts do have the potential to reduce certain stereotypes or to increase them. More attention needs to be paid to the subtleties of the types of jokes and the context in order to better understand the program's and individual sketches' effects on viewer attitudes.

CONCLUSION

Chapter 7

This dissertation has sought to extend scholars' understanding of the meanings viewers make with humorous mediated communication, particularly that which revolves around racial or ethnic stereotypes. Through a survey of humor theory, an examination of articles of humor criticism, and a multi-methodological case study of *Chappelle's Show,* this dissertation comments on the state of humor scholarship in communication and offers suggestions for future productive directions. In the introduction, I discussed the controversies inspired by several examples of humorous mediated discourse – the Prophet Muhammad cartoons, Imus' racist remarks directed at the Rutgers women's basketball team, the discriminatory commentary in the 2006 mockumentary *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan,* and finally, Dave Chappelle's departure from *Chappelle's Show* due in part to concerns about the reception of the program's racial stereotype-driven humorous discourse.

While I have been writing this dissertation, I have become aware of numerous other controversies, although none received as much attention as the previous examples. Digital circulation of satire and parody has become a serious issue in China. Cultural critics have argued that satirical and parodic texts in China are a response to their "overly solemn" society, which restricts outlets to express their frustrations. Even these outlets have become restricted after the Administration of Radio, Film and Television decided that that "all online video material must pass through regular censorship channels"

(Tatlow 5). The U.K. also felt the rumblings over a "comedy" controversy: There was an outcry in summer 2007 when Borders and other book-sellers put the first in-color, English language version of the 1931 "comic book" *Tintin in the Congo* on the shelves of their children's sections (Goers 30). The comic book featured racist and colonialist images that were inappropriate (especially for children), according to critics.

Concerns over comedy, satire, and parody are of course prominent in the United States as well. In 2007 Mexico-based clothing design company Naco was featured in several news stories for their T-shirts with slogans such as "M is for Mojado" ("wetback"), "C is for Coyote" ("border smuggler") and "I is for Illegal" (Marr para. 7). News coverage featured both sides of the debate – the designer claimed that the shirts were designed to "laugh at racism" and a representative of the Spanish American Anti Discrimination League expressed his concern about the shirts potentially reinforcing racism ("Mexican T-Shirts"). On an individual level, Halle Berry, Kathy Griffin, and Golf Channel anchor Kelly Tilghman were also chastised to varying degrees for their offensive jokes. While appearing on *The Tonight Show*, Berry "joked" that a photo of her that was altered to make her nose larger looked like her "Jewish cousin" (Fanning para. 3). Griffin offended some with an Emmy acceptance speech in which she poked fun at actors who thank Jesus for their awards. Griffin closed her acceptance speech saying, "suck it, Jesus. This award is my God now" (Eckstrom B09). Finally, Tilghman's suggestion that the only way for young golfers to beat Tiger Woods would be to "lynch [Tiger] in a back alley," drew the most mainstream response (Carlson C07). Activist Al Sharpton demanded that she be fired, but Tilghman retained her job following a two week suspension.

These controversies will likely continue to punctuate the news as humorous texts continue to push the boundaries of social acceptability. In the pages that follow, I discuss my findings that can add to our understanding of how audience members interpret humorous mediated communication that is premised on stereotypes and also how scholars can be better equipped to critique such texts in the future.

THEORIES AND METHODS FOR UNDERSTANDING HUMOR

The first two related research questions I asked are: "What theories and methods exist for understanding the rhetorical dimensions of humor?" and "What are the strengths and limitations in the theoretical underpinnings and methodologies of contemporary essays in rhetorical criticism with regard to understanding how viewers co-create meanings with stereotype-based humor?" In Chapter Two, I tackled the theoretical portion of these questions by putting three theories on humor/comedy – humor motivation, literary theories, and rhetorical theories – in dialogue with one another to better understand the unique contribution each makes to scholars' understandings of humor. Whereas many scholars choose from one theory set and there are disciplinary divides in theoretical approaches to understanding humorous interactions and humorous mediated texts, I argued that the three can be viewed as fruitful complements to one another.

The literary theories emphasize the humor stimulus and offer three major classifications for the type of stimulus: irony, parody, and satire. The rhetorical theories account for the effects or outcomes of the stimulus. Ironic stimuli can result in perspective by incongruity or its effects can be accounted for by the comic frame in

which social actors are gently changed. Parodic or satiric texts may both be connected to the rhetorical concepts of Gates' Signifying, Burke's theory of dwarfing the situation, Burke's theory of the burlesque frame, or Baktin's carnivalesque. Both Signifying and dwarfing the situation can be seen as symbolic methods of attaining relief from existing social situations. Gates describes Signifying as a counter-hegemonic strategy of symbolic liberation in oppressive conditions, but Burke believes that some humor may "dwarf the situation" and result in complacency about unfavorable circumstances. Both parody and satire can be part and parcel of Signifying or dwarfing the situation. But, depending on the circumstances, they can also be considered part of the carnivalesque, a playful form of de-hierarchization, or the burlesque frame, a more aggressive form of social change that may use humor or other symbolic methods to lambaste enemies.

The humor motivation theories are the connective tissue that unites the literary and rhetorical theories, explaining the processes through which people are amused by humor. If the text is ironic, resulting in a gentle form of social change, the mechanism by which the text affected the audience is through incongruity or a collision between the expected and the unexpected. Parodic and satiric texts can interact with audiences in various ways. Sometimes the humor in such texts will yield relief, a release of the audience's negative emotions (relief theory). In other situations, it may provide them with feelings of superiority or a symbolic victory over an enemy (superiority theory). The differences between relief theory and superiority theory are tenuous. Relief theory is focused on the emotional coping that the humor facilitates. Superiority theory, on the other hand, is not about passivity but is an aggressive assertion of power or symbolic domination. Superiority theory connects to carnivalesque and the burlesque frame

because it does not describe humor as simply a vehicle for emotional coping, but as an outlet for expressing discontent or altering social structures (even if the change is temporary).

In sum, instead of picking and choosing among various theories, Chapter Two urged communication scholars to consider the related groupings of stimulus, rhetorical theory, and humor motivation theory that can collectively provide a holistic view of humorous discourses and their role in society. Chapter Three was the criticism complement to Chapter Two's theory survey: It accounted for the ways in which scholars have used humor theories and how those theories inform scholars' conclusions about humorous mediated texts.

Three themes emerged from Chapter Three's survey of almost 40 articles of humor criticism in communication journals: authors do not clearly define their theoretical lenses, authors make many conjectures about media effects and hypothesize about interpretive communities, and there are mostly ambivalent collective findings about the impact of various humorous texts on society. With regard to the definition of theoretical lenses, I noted that there is little agreement on the definitions of satire and parody, and also that many scholars do not acknowledge the audience-constructedness of these labels. Satire and parody are in the eye of the beholder and it is important to acknowledge that labeling a text as a satire or parody does not mean that all audience members interpret it in that manner.

The conjectures about persuasion and audience hypotheses push humor criticism into the realm of media effects, but without substantial support. Several scholars speculate about how their text affected the audience (conjectures about media effects) or

make claims about the existence of multiple discrete interpretive communities (audience hypotheses). In the vast majority of humor criticism articles, these different inferential leaps are not supported with information about actual audience members (other than the opinions of the researchers themselves), a key ingredient to adequately support such audience-based claims. Theorizing about the audience may seem like a positive step toward acknowledging the importance of viewer meaning-making, but I believe it ultimately reifies the critic-centric model of examining humorous mediated texts for it makes it seem like the critic has exhausted the text's meanings and/or that the polysemy of the text is limited.

In the ambivalent collective findings section I discussed the contrasts in conclusions reached by critics of different humorous texts. The findings of my survey of articles resulted in almost a dead split between counter-hegemonic and hegemonic conclusions, sometimes even among pieces that analyzed the same text. While I think that it is productive for scholars to offer up ambivalent critiques of a humorous text, the disagreement among different pieces of criticism signals that there is still a vast area of "unknown" that humor scholars can and should explore.

Each of these limitations that I've described in existing scholarship can be improved upon separately (in large part by incorporating actual audience studies), but I believe that the issue underlying them all is that humorous texts are not treated as their own genre of analysis. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, humorous texts are notably polysemic. I have supported this claim through an ambivalent rhetorical analysis of *Chappelle's Show,* by recounting divergent interpretations of viewer focus groups, and by presenting the findings of the statistical analysis, which reveal that a viewer's

race/ethnicity and prejudice level do not have a significant relationship with liking or the frequency of viewing the program. Although Celeste Condit's theory of polyvalence is extremely useful when examining viewers' interpretations of dramas or other genres of mediated communication, humorous texts have a greater multiplicity of meaning available to viewers. Viewers cannot just choose to agree or disagree with a dominant meaning, for there is no clear dominant meaning. In other words, viewers don't just "get the joke:" They may derive a variety of humorous meanings based on the interaction between their subject position(s) and the different aspects of a text on which they choose to focus.

Before I present my solution to this problem of not treating humorous mediated discourse as its own genre, I will discuss my findings for the other three research questions. The final pages of the conclusion will culminate in my suggestions for improving the study of humorous mediated communication so that the properties of the discourse match the methods of analysis.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CHAPPELLE'S SHOW

The third and fourth research questions I asked were: "What does textual analysis reveal about the images *Chappelle's Show* constructs of races/ethnicities and race relations?" and "What polysemic meanings about races/ethnicities and race relations may be drawn from the text?" Although I have stated the fourth question here, in the summary of the textual analysis, that is a question that extends into the audience-based chapters of dissertation.

My analysis of a dozen *Chappelle's Show* sketches through the frame of ambivalence yielded several prominent themes related to stereotypes, the use of racial slurs, and the blending of serious and non-serious discourse through various techniques of textual framing. Mediated depictions of stereotypes have been a point of controversy raised in the popular press, in scholarly communities, and among regular viewers. *Chappelle's Show* is of course not immune to this controversy and even brought the issue to the forefront with Chappelle's departure from the show. In my analysis of several sketches, including "The Mad Real World," "Reparations 2003," and "Trading Spouses," I questioned whether or not the negative African American stereotypes would be perceived as satires or as "realistic" representations. This important question cannot be definitively answered by textual analysis, nor by audience analysis, for every unique mix of content, viewer, and situation will yield its own meaning.

I believe there is less ambivalence in the program's use of racial slurs and that these tend to function hegemonically. It is positive that members of the *Chappelle's Show* studio audience did not seem inclined to find the words themselves humorous, unless they were part of a more complex joke (i.e. White teenagers rejoicing after being called n------ by an African American). However, the prevalence of many racial epithets likely does not have the power to change the negative connotations of the words on a societal scale, but it seems more likely to discourage viewers from interrogating the serious implications of using such terms in their conversations. My conclusions about the limited ambivalence of the racial slurs are based in part on the lack of variety in the discursive frames surrounding the words. Even when terms such as the N word are used in different contexts (i.e. being applied to a White family), the discourse is still rooted in frames of

stereotypical ideologies. Indeed, it seems that *Chappelle's Show* was able to change the situation, but not the ideological anchor, perhaps because the discourse would no longer be humorous or resonate with any of the viewers' existing schema. Instead of commenting on the Niggar family's forgetfulness about paying their (milk) bill, what would the reaction be if the show commented on their affinity for milk? Silence seems most likely for I cannot think of a stereotype connecting African Americans and milk consumption.

Although I make the argument that textual analysis should be combined with other audience-based methods in order to yield the most productive understanding of a humorous mediated text, the textual analysis was instructive in its own right. I do not think it is suitable for critics to read the audience off the text (if the text is part of the broad genre of humorous mediated communication), but textual analysis can yield interesting hypotheses about the textual features that may guide the audience toward particular readings. For example, my careful analysis of the dozen sketches revealed the show commonly uses ironic layering between the context and the discourse (i.e. "Two Legal Systems" and "The Niggar Family" sketches) and that Chappelle often provides serious introductions for non-serious sketches (i.e. "The Mad Real World" and "Reparations 2003"). The observation of these patterns in the ways that the discourse is framed can have notable implications for scholars' further understanding of other texts that contain humorous mediated discourse. Some areas of further exploration related to this subject might be an analysis of humor ratings comparing sketches or other comedy vignettes that use such discursive patterns, an analysis of the points of relevance or more discrete jokes (individual jokes within the larger sketch) that appeal to viewers, and a

comparison of the effects that these types of sketches may have on viewers' opinions of the serious social issues that the sketches or vignettes address.

On a broader scale, the textual analysis did prime me to pursue the other research methodologies. More specifically, it helped me immerse myself in the text and formulate areas of inquiry for the audience-based studies. Because I had observed a difference in the valence of White and African American stereotypes, I was interested to see if the focus group participants also interpreted there to be a difference. I was also concerned with how they dealt with any cognitive dissonance regarding their enjoyment of the show if they did observe that there were negative African American stereotypes. After engaging in repeated viewings and transcribing the three seasons, I also felt confident that I knew the program better than the focus group participants. This knowledge really helped me guide the discussion and frame more specific probing questions. I was able to recognize sketches by the participants' descriptions, even if they could not remember the specific title of the sketch, and keep the discussion flowing so that other group members could participate and better understand what sketch someone else was referencing.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF *CHAPPELLE'S SHOW*

My final research question asked "What do qualitative and quantitative audience-based studies reveal about the conscious and unconscious meanings that viewers co-create with *Chappelle's Show's* portrayals of race/ethnicity and racial/ethnic relations?" I will answer the question in parts (as my chapters do), first focusing on the qualitative findings, moving on to the quantitative findings, and finishing with a discussion of the unique contribution each makes to our overall understanding of the reception of humorous mediated communication in the "Implications" sections of the conclusion.

I conducted 15 focus groups and 3 small group interviews with college-age people of various races/ethnicities in order to gather viewer discourse about *Chappelle's Show.* Participants were asked questions about a variety of aspects of *Chappelle's Show* and its broader social implications. Utilizing grounded theory, the responses were open coded into three overarching categories: appeal, stereotypes, and effects. Several competing tensions were distilled from the analysis. These tensions highlight the importance of "relevance" – a term Fiske uses to describe an active viewing experience in which individuals take pleasure in televised content that is "relevant" to his or her "social allegiances" at the time ("Meaningful Moments" 247). Many of the focus groups were able to describe negative African American stereotypes that were represented in the program; however, no Caucasian participants thought that *Chappelle's Show* could have a negative social impact. None were willing to admit that the program, although it portrays negative stereotypes, could perpetuate discrimination. This tension in their responses suggests that facing discrimination was not a relevant reality for them or that they did not want to admit complicity with perpetuating discrimination by watching the show. As Cooper has said, many Whites feel a desire to defend their race from being perceived as prejudiced (221).

There was also a tension or contradiction in some of the responses from African American participants. They were more likely to acknowledge the negative African American stereotypes in the program *and* be concerned about the potentially negative effects the program may have on viewers. This tension seems to have been mitigated by another factor: Several African American participants noted that *Chappelle's Show* presents unique experiences they could relate to as African Americans. In other words,

many saw the program as a form of minor discourse, and this outweighed their concerns about the show's potentially negative impact on other viewers.

A final overarching tension could be seen within the theme of boundary crossing or taboo violation. Numerous participants stated that *Chappelle's Show* was humorous and/or a positive social force because it encourages viewers to relax about serious issues through its violation of social norms. Many also described *Chappelle's Show's* focus on controversial issues or its efforts to approach particular topics in controversial ways as a unique feature of the program, when compared with most other television content. While addressing controversial issues and taboo subjects may have productive social consequences, several non-African American participants seemed to suggest that society should be more "relaxed" about serious issues such as racial discrimination and sexual assault. Contrasting these responses, there seemed to be a difference in cathartic release that the program afforded to African Americans and non-African Americans. For some African American focus group participants, the program provided an emotional release by discussing social issues, discrimination in Hollywood, African American celebrities and politicians, and other points of relevance to them. For some, but not all non-African American participants, the emotional release seemed to be more related to relaxing the boundaries of social acceptability, allowing them to at least temporarily escape from a politically correct frame of mind.

In sum, there were many similarities between the responses of focus group participants of various race/ethnicities. Many cited similar motives for watching the show (several groups overlapped in their selections of favorite sketches), and the vast majority of groups observed the same stereotypes or character representations in the program. The

ways in which they made sense of the content differed, with the differences due likely in part to disparate points of relevance. Many African American participants were concerned that the program might encourage other viewers to be more forthcoming with discrimination; however, most generally were fans of the show, due in part to its unique portrayal of African American experiences. In contrast, no Caucasian participants and few other non-African Americans were concerned about potentially negative effects of the show, which they rationalized through a variety of different strategies saying that it was "just comedy," everyone is stereotyped, or that there could be only third-person effects (on young people or adults with little exposure to diversity).

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF *CHAPPELLE'S SHOW*

The survey research filled a few gaps in our understanding of *Chappelle's Show* viewers' uses and gratifications, and the relationships between race/ethnicity, prejudice, and liking or watching the show, but did not definitively answer the questions about the program's impact on viewer prejudice. With regard to uses and gratifications (measures that were reported in Chapter Five), participants who reported watching *Chappelle's Show* occasionally, weekly, or more than once a week (N = 74) said that these are the most common reasons they watch the show: to laugh (N=71), to spend time with friends/family (N=37), to kill time (N=36), and to be able to participate in conversations about the show (N=33). In sum, amusement and social interaction seemed to be the strongest motivations to watch the program. This provided a contrast to the hypotheses of focus group participants who thought that viewers of *Chappelle's Show* would learn about diversity and social issues from the program. Although it is possible that viewers

are unconsciously gaining this type of knowledge, they did not seem to be actively seeking it out.

The most interesting findings for me in the statistical analysis section were the data confirming Hypotheses 1 through 4, which essentially posited that viewer race/ethnicity and prejudice would be highly unrelated to the frequency of viewing the show or liking it. P values for these measures ranged from $p < .811$ to $p < .993$, so all were highly insignificant. These findings provide statistical support for the theory of humor and polysemy that is a key claim of this dissertation. Clearly, viewers of various races/ethnicities and prejudice levels are deriving enjoyment from the show. These results strongly indicate that viewers are interpreting the content of the program in disparate ways, not just disagreeing with a dominant meaning of the sketches or overall program.

With regard to the effects *Chappelle's Show* viewing may have on prejudice, the results were unexpected, and none of the differences were significant. Some interesting trends emerged, however, in that the specific subject matter of the sketches may have had an impact on participants' responses to particular survey questions. For example, the Plane sketch depicted stereotyping and discrimination that was situated on an airplane. Compared to participants who completed the survey measures *before* viewing the sketch, those who completed the survey measures *after* viewing the Plane sketch were more likely to say that it is wrong for cab drivers to discriminate against African Americans. Thus, the issue of discrimination in transportation may have been a salient feature for people who viewed the Plane sketch.

Future studies on the relationship between viewing humorous mediated stereotypes and viewer prejudice may be more likely to have significant results if the

survey questions address specific themes that are prevalent in the mediated texts. Other suggestions for improving on the studies are to expose the participants to a more in-depth stimulus. Viewing a short sketch may not yield enough of a persuasive impact, but viewing a whole program of *Chappelle's Show* or a cluster of sketches may be more significant. Also, in order to eliminate individual variance, it would be useful to do pre and post tests so that the t-tests would be within subject measures. Finally, future studies should consider doing pilot tests of the stimulus materials and asking pilot test participants to evaluate the sketches (or episodes) and assess their satirical qualities before drawing hypotheses related to the content of the stimulus materials.

IMPLICATIONS: METHODOLOGICAL

This dissertation utilized a combination of three methods in order to better understand how viewers make meaning from the humorous communication premised on racial stereotypes in *Chappelle's Show.* In the survey of humor criticism articles, I reported that many communication scholars make audience conjectures (unsupported claims about how audience members are affected by humorous texts), and that they also advance audience hypotheses (unsupported claims about the existence of particular interpretive communities). If these are the types of claims that authors wish to make, they need to utilize audience-based methods.

Audience-based methods, such as focus groups, interviews, participant observations, viewer ethnographies, surveys, and even analyzing public discourse from a variety of individuals (such as that found on an online message board), are all productive methods to support these types of arguments communication scholars seem to want to

make about how people interpret or are affected by humorous mediated texts. As Jensen has noted, qualitative research generally focuses on the *process* of meaning-making, whereas quantitative methods focus on the *products* of meaning-making (32-33). Chapter Five of this dissertation reported interesting findings regarding the process of viewer meaning-making with *Chappelle's Show.* The qualitative analysis has revealed some similarities and differences in viewers' interpretations of the programs, along the lines of viewers' racial and ethnic identification. Most notably, relevance of one's racial/ethnic identity seemed to play a strong part in one's interpretation of the potential impact of the program. Chapter Six was not as successful in explicating the products of meaning making. With a more sophisticated research design, however, statistical analysis could have been a more productive piece of the interpretive puzzle.

So how do rhetorical scholars go about collecting and analyzing additional pieces of evidence to support their audience claims? Qualitative research is a closer cousin to rhetorical research, for both critique discourse. With qualitative research, however, one needs to first facilitate the creation of the discourse and then gather that discourse. It is important to first familiarize oneself with the conventions of facilitating focus groups, conducting interviews, doing ethnographies, or engaging in participant observation before beginning such an undertaking. In my experience, learning the ropes of qualitative methods is an easier transition to make than the one from rhetorical studies to quantitative studies. It is possible to become competent in such methods by taking an advanced class and reading from a selection of various qualitative methods resources.

As I have demonstrated here, statistical analysis requires more sophisticated research design, data gathering, and data analysis techniques. There are many useful

research design, statistics, and SPSS books that can help guide researchers through the various stages of the research project. And if a rhetorical scholar has reservations about engaging in quantitative research, there is always the option of recruiting a co-primary investigator who has experience in such methods. Rhetorical scholars seem more reluctant than others in the communication discipline to engage in co-authored studies; however, the benefits of having two or more researchers with complementary skills should not be ignored just because it is not (yet) a common practice.

Despite my sincere attempts to encourage audience-studies, I have realistic expectations that not all rhetorical critics will be encouraged to branch out in this direction. If rhetorical scholars do want to focus solely on textual analysis, that, too, can be a productive method for understanding humorous mediated communication. The main warning for studies of this sort should of course be that the author(s)' conclusions should not overreach their support. For critics of humorous mediated texts, I strongly encourage a more open form of inquiry that deviates from the traditional criticism-as-argument model and resists drawing definitive conclusions about a text. Because humorous mediated communication (particularly that which is premised on stereotypes) is such a polysemic genre, it is important to pair it with a form of criticism that accounts for the diversity of meaning. I call this method "criticism as polysemic exploration," because it seeks to probe a text, to investigate, and examine it. And that's it. Much like grounded theory generates hypotheses from qualitative research, criticism as polysemic exploration also does not seek answers or conclusions, but seeks only to ask more focused and informed questions.

IMPLICATIONS: STEREOTYPICAL HUMOROUS MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

My final research question asked "In what ways do the findings of the audience-based studies complement or supplement the textual analysis?" The major finding that is reinforced in each of the three separate case study chapters is the existence of polysemy: the textual analysis highlighted polysemy by presenting an ambivalent reading of a dozen sketches, the qualitative analysis described the differing interpretations and different points of relevance among people of different races/ethnicities (also acknowledging that one's race/ethnicity does not lead to one monolithic interpretation of the program), and the statistical study provided empirical support for the existence of polysemy because people of various subject positions and attitudes reported similar levels of enjoyment in the program. This finding highlights the double-bind facing comedians who focus on racial, ethnic, religious, regional, gender, sexuality, disability, and other categories of stereotypes. For many entertainers, attracting an audience is a chief concern. However, comedians who appeal to a vast and diverse audience should be wary of the ways in which their humor may be interpreted differently by various audience members.

Based on one explanation he provided for his flight to Africa, Chappelle was concerned about the ways in which non-African Americans were interpreting the stereotypes in his program. The textual analysis explicated many divergent ways that viewers could interpret the sketches, and negative African American stereotypes were a primary concern. In the focus groups I facilitated, and in the interviews that Rawlings and Murphy conducted with the *Chappelle's Show* studio audience, viewers had mixed opinions on the presence of stereotypes. Many non-African Americans were reluctant to admit that the negativity of the stereotypes could translate into enhanced prejudice.

However, some African Americans were concerned that they were stereotyped in ways that were more negative than the other racial or ethnic stereotypes on the program. Although the quantitative analysis did not yield significant findings that the show promotes prejudice, several statements made by focus group participants seemed to indicate that the show at least has the potential to reinforce prejudice. The following quote was one of the most troubling and powerful to me:

> [T]he truth is there's always some truth to every stereotype and so I wonder if Dave Chappelle [. . .] intentionally puts these stereotypes out there. Black people are his audience and they're going to learn from it and say 'we are being made fun of' and [. . .] they're laughing they're having a good time but it kind of switches on a trigger that says 'I'm not going to be labeled like the lazy-Kool-Aid-drinking-sitting-at-home-not-doing-anything-working-for-McDonalds guy. I'm going to go get a career and go to school and get an education.' (Asian Indian Group 12)

This statement, and several others, operate within the discursive realm of stereotypes and definitely do not challenge the negative representations in the show. In other words, these statements indicate that some viewers saw the stereotypes not as satire, but as reality.

There is also evidence to the contrary of the previous statement and some focus group participants did seem to question their stereotypes after watching those ideologies caricatured on the show. For example, an African American participant explained that Asian students at her college are often stereotyped as being the valedictorian of their high school, but that she really tries "not to say those [stereotypes] or act in that sense, because you watch the show and even though it's funny, it's still a stereotype that everybody thinks of when they look at you" (Group 16). The statistical analysis comparing conscious prejudice measures before and after watching *Chappelle's Show* sketches tentatively indicated that the program (or at least some individual sketches) may enhance

awareness of stereotypes and discourage prejudice: Although not statistically significant, the prejudice measures *after* watching either the Plane or Miss Cleo sketches were lower than the measures taken *before* participants watched the sketches.

In sum, with regard to the impact of the portrayal of negative stereotypes in a humorous frame, the jury is still out and will likely never reach definitive conclusions on the issue. Individual viewer characteristics are an incredibly powerful force in the meanings that viewers derive from the text. Comedians who choose to address stereotypes and are concerned about the potential impact of the stereotypes are necessarily treading on dangerous ground. Comedians are not in a completely untenable position and can still control the encoding of their humor, however. In Chapter Four, I was most optimistic about the counter-hegemonic qualities of the "Two Legal Systems" sketch. Chappelle previewed the sketch by noting the serious issue of disparity in the legal treatment of African Americans and Whites that had recently punctuated the news, specifically white collar criminals who received negligible punishments. The content of the sketch then used what I interpreted to be satiric irony to demonstrate what would happen if the racial disparities were reversed, alternating several times between the stories of Tron Carter and Charles Jeffries. The alternation between stories may encourage viewers to remain unfixed in their orientations, to constantly question any stereotypical norms, assumptions, or schemas. Unfortunately, the Implicit Association Test did not reveal any statistically significant positive effects of the sketch on viewer prejudices. However, I still believe that other audience-based support signals that the sketch has counter-hegemonic potential: it was not cited as a favorite by any of the focus groups and is not included in the "Best of *Chappelle's Show* DVD." Praising the sketch's

lack of popularity as a sign for its counter-hegemonic potential again highlights the double-bind facing comedians who draw on stereotypes.

If I had the opportunity to give Dave Chappelle and other controversial comedians advice about creating pro-social comedy, I wouldn't waste time telling them about the difficult path they have chosen (Chappelle already knows, and the rest probably do, too). I would encourage the comedians who draw from stereotypes to continue to express the unique experiences of their subculture. Women, African Americans, the disabled, homosexuals, and others need a place to hear their unique grievances aired and need to see their life experiences reflected in mediated texts. I would also warn that although they may want to focus on their target audience, they cannot ignore the other members of their audience and should always be aware of their capacity to reinforce prejudices by working within a frame of stereotypical discourse. Finally, I would caution that sketch comedy and variety shows are the most polysemic; in other words, comedians will have the greatest difficulty trying to control the dominant or intended meaning of such programs. Because sketch comedy programs consist of a mélange of texts that lack a coherent theme or overarching trajectory, viewers have more control in choosing from among a variety of meanings. They need not tune in throughout a show and can therefore selectively attend to sketches that resonate with their viewpoints or don't challenge their existing schema.

It is important for comedians and other humor creators to have points of resonance with their audience members. As I noted earlier, incongruity needs a connection to reality in order to be amusing (see Raskin 180). That resonance with viewers' realities does not always need to be in the form of negative stereotypes, but can be in the form of social commentary, the experience of discrimination, and other

interesting and novel experiences (novel in that they are not given much exposure in mainstream media). Negative stereotypes of marginalized groups should be used sparingly, and, whenever possible, should be framed by serious commentary or punctuated by other textual cues that encourage viewers to see the satirical quality of the sketch. Even though this humor strategy may be less memorable or amusing (as I mentioned earlier with the "Two Legal Systems'" lack of popularity), the student groups who watched "Two Legal Systems" prior to taking the IAT laughed heartily in many parts of the sketch.

I hope that this dissertation has shown that scholars, comedians, and the public should be concerned about the potential impact of stereotype-based humorous mediated communication. It should be neither universally condemned, nor should it all be judiciously praised. Scholars need to acknowledge this nuance and explore different methods through which to mine the meanings viewers co-create with these types of texts. After this extensive research process, I believe it is possible (but admittedly difficult) for comedians and humorists to send more socially aware messages to their audiences. I also think that it is possible for rhetorical scholars to improve their criticism of humorous mediated texts, and adopt a blended audience-based and text-based approach to understanding such texts. Instead of trying to make a text conform to the conventions of our criticism, we need to acknowledge the power and polysemy of humor, and seek to better map that polysemy.

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